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I Died Twice

A Story of Hope

Nilton Nixon

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*Dedicated to Mana Bela,
who truly teaches me to hope*

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“Hope does not disappoint” Rom. 5:5

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PROLOGUE



I still remember the story papa told me when I was a little girl. It is about the journey of two warriors sent on a mission to fight against a furious villain who lived in a far land. They were told that if they won against that villain, they would have half of the kingdom's treasure in their hands. As they were sent, each was given a pot of flowers to take care of during their journey. The king's order said that they should take care of the flowers, keeping them alive until the day they finally met the villain. He added that each flower they held would be important in order to win the battle. Hearing this, the two warriors were in complete confusion about how a flower could help them fight against their enemy. They had questions inside their heads, but none of them was brave enough to pronounce a word in front of the king, knowing that it would be considered a disrespectful act against him.

And so they set on the journey to that land far away where the furious villain lived. Each of them had in their one hand a pot of flower and on another hand a sword that would be used for fighting. After spending several days on the journey, they began to feel the burden the

flower gave them, they began to think to leave the pot of flower in the road, or just plant it in the jungle, and at the moment they return to the kingdom, they would take it back and present to the king. Thus, one of them initiated that corrupted act first; he took out the flower from its pot, and planted in the edge of the road, covering with some leaves that nothing could damage it. Another after seeing it, he began to plan for his as well. After few paces ahead, he then did the same thing, planted it and covered up with leaves. Both of them at that moment had no more burden to bring with along the journey.

And so they set out on the journey to that distant land where the furious villain lived. Each of them had in one hand a pot of flowers and in the other hand a sword that would be used for fighting. After spending several days on the journey, they began to feel the burden the flowers gave them. They started to think about leaving the pot of flowers on the road or planting them in the jungle, intending to retrieve them upon their return to the kingdom and present them to the king.

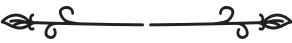
Thus, one of them initiated this deceitful act first; he took the flower out of its pot and planted it at the edge of the road, covering it with some leaves to protect it. Seeing this, the other warrior planned to do the same. After a few more paces, he also planted his flower and covered it with leaves. At that moment, both of them were relieved of the burden they had carried along the journey.

After several more days spent on the journey, they became aware that the journey would take more time than they had expected. They began to feel tired and slowly lost their desire to continue. Then they thought that maybe they should leave their swords as well to lessen their fatigue, knowing that the swords could be burdens too. Thus, they left their swords at the edge of the road, also covering them with leaves to protect them. Then, they continued the journey.

Day after day, they finally arrived at the land where they were told the furious villain lived. It was a village full of children running and laughing, farmers working in their fields, old men sitting together and talking about the weather, and people who smiled whenever they met strangers. They were then invited by an old man to his house, who gave them food and water to recover their strength. After finishing the meal, they asked the old man to close the door so they could tell him a secret.

The secret was the reason why they came to that village; it was to fight against a villain said to live there, as ordered by the king, for which they would receive a prize. After secretly revealing the truth to the old man, to their surprise, he smiled and showed them a necklace tucked under his shirt. Both of them were astonished that the old man had the same necklace as the ones given to them by the king before they set out on their journey. The old man whispered to them: "I was once a warrior like you."

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PART I

When I was just a kid, I always dreamt of flying like birds. At other times, I saw flowers growing together in my grandfather's camp, and I wanted to be one of those dancers, enjoying the wind teaching every move. And fish in the lake—how amazing it is to always have company wherever you go. After all, I was just a little girl who dreamt. I dreamt of becoming part of the world. I wanted to know the world, at least my own world. Everything more than sheepfolds, small birds, green grasses in the camp, endless rivers, farmers, shepherds with their herds, and the sun in the morning. They are part of my world, a tiny world. Is the world part of me? No one ever asked me before, so I courageously asked myself.

I had a father, *papa*, who knew the world better than anyone else in my village. He was an old brown-skinned man with long white hair. His face was covered by a beard and mustache of the same bright color. He also had wrinkles on his forehead that attested to his wisdom. Some of his teeth were already gone, but that did not compare to the multitude of his golden words. It seemed like every time someone came to ask him for advice, he always had many new insights to offer. Sometimes, I tended to wonder how that old man always had new insights to share. It had been nearly twenty years since I witnessed this so-called miracle. He was my *papa*, an old man that everyone in my village knew.

I was sure that papa was not the eldest in the village; I knew a lot of shepherds who were far older. I said this because I believed that the older we got, the wiser we became, and thus the shepherds might be wiser than papa. However, I would say the strength of papa, as I heard from mama, was that since he was a teenager like me, he used to walk and talk with the old men of the village, mainly the shepherds. He was a shepherd as well. I did not know very well if he went shepherding because he truly was a shepherd, or if it was just an excuse to steal the wisdom from the old men in the camp. I thought both could be true; being a shepherd, whatever the reason, would slowly make you wiser. To lead the herd, to forecast the weather, to endure hot sunbeams, to shelter during heavy rain, to be vigilant of possible dangers, and to keep company with those that do not know how to talk. These could possibly make a shepherd wise. I believed that.

Sometimes I thought about how unlucky I was to not experience those things. I grew up when shepherding was no longer a privilege for men. It seemed that being a shepherd nowadays was considered a man's misfortune. I knew everyone in the village thought that way, but I did not know why I thought differently. I really wanted to be a shepherd, even in a world where going to school was the hallmark of every fortunate man. I had never talked about this dream to anyone, except the bright moon in the dark night.

That felt very true when those considered wise had never gone to school even once, and reading long texts was not one of their abilities. My papa, as far as I knew, did not know how to read a single word, but those who taught me to read at school said to me that he was very wise. Sometimes I felt it was very awkward, but I did not express that thought to anyone because in today's world, another word for 'being different' is 'mad.' So I decided to be normal in this world and be mad in my own world. I just could not help but keep asking such so-called mad questions inside my head, and I did not want to silence them either. Maybe because I knew that that was the strength of every shepherd: their head was full of 'mad' questions. The questions about whether it was going to rain today or not; which camp to go to next; what to do when a snake attacked the herd; where to find shelter during the rainy season; and mostly, why the herd acted so weird and unusual.

Actually, those were not really 'mad' questions, just not important to those who were not shepherds. Everyone had their own world and their own important questions. Shepherds' questions were not important to the teachers at the school, and so most probably, the questions teachers asked me at school were not so important to the shepherds. Maybe that was the reason for my papa's illiteracy and the teachers' praise of papa. Nothing was more important than anything else; everything was

important in its own world. But again, being wise could be a little more important than other things in this world full of 'mad' and important questions. And that was the reason I still wanted to be a shepherd even though my teacher told mama that I was the brightest student at school.



Everything went almost the same until one day, that girl with the dream of becoming a shepherd was told to leave home. Truly, to leave a house where she had spent more than twenty years since she was born into this world. Since she started to know that she had her own world, a very different world inside herself that she kept secret. The house where lived an old man whom everyone in the village called 'wise' and she called Papa. Indeed, he was her father, but somehow she felt distant, maybe because she was a daughter who worked most of the time with mama, or maybe because she felt uncomfortable for some reason that she did not even know.

That day when I was about to leave, mama was the one who stayed up all night to cry with me. She had once been a girl like me, which was why she knew what a girl might feel when she had to live apart from her beloved ones. This might have been a fear for a young girl like me, but for me, the fear of stepping into a new world was more terrifying than leaving my old world. I did not know why,

but the fact was that I did not think too much about papa and mama that day. I did not think this meant that I did not love them, because I knew how much I loved them. But maybe because they were so close to my heart that my heart could not even imagine me staying too far from them.

One or two months later, maybe the distance would try to convince my heart that I was truly apart from them, but I did not think it could overpower the love in my heart. What I thought since I left them was that one had to learn to love without sight, because love is not about what the eyes see, but what the heart feels. Like that, distance is nothing.

And so I left them in the very early morning when the birds started singing. I noticed it even then, though I think most people did not care about it as they grew up. I was very attuned to the little things around me, just like a girl who wanted to know more about the world. That girl who once chased butterflies in the camp full of flowers still lived in me even after more than twenty years. I was happy about that.

As I lifted my feet onto the bus full of people going to the same place as me—Dili city—I did not know much about that place, but I knew that I was going to study there. So, there would be schools again in Dili for me to attend as an adult girl, a *fetoraan*. Would I become

wiser as I went there? Was the school there different? What would I learn in the school? And the teachers and friends, would they be as nice as in my previous school? Indeed, I tried so hard not to ask these types of questions the night before I left home, but my mind did its work without listening to my order. Let it be that way. But I surely knew that everything would change in the new place.

I was so sure of this since mama and I went to buy shoes, *sapatu*, in the market. Something I had never used since I was born. I had only seen my teachers or some people who came to visit papa wear them. I never imagined getting used to those things on my feet. I only knew the sandals, *sinelus*, which everyone wore everywhere, even to school. After buying them, I tried to wear them inside the bedroom with mama's help. I never imagined how difficult it would be for a *fetoraan* to do something so simple. It looked very easy on the feet of the teachers at school, but it was another thing on my feet. They were not friends yet. After trying for a couple of hours, I still found it difficult to walk. I felt like something was trying to hurt my feet. It was very torturous. I can say that mama tried her best that night not to laugh at me. She smiled forcibly, I noted. I did not know what she was feeling that night. Of course, it is very normal for me not to understand her feelings because I am not a mother yet. There is a big difference between

just a *fetoraan* and a mama. I am sure one day I would know that feeling, but at least for that night, I did not know what it meant when a mama smiled forcibly.

That night was the last night mama and I sat together and recounted numerous stories of her past life as a *fetoraan* and so on. It used to happen every night, but that night I really cherished that valuable moment. I also wished that Papa would join us, sitting in the kitchen and recounting the stories of old times. Papa always sat in the front yard with uncle, *tiu*, or sometimes with some of his old friends nearby; they ate like men and talked like men. That had been the way for more than twenty years: men and women had their own place, even at home. I was a *fetoraan*, and I was supposed to know my place as well.

Just a thought to know the old days of papa, I think that would be great. I think papa's stories would be as interesting as mama's. Honestly, I really wanted to know his stories as a shepherd—the tales and legends of my village. I had met many of my male friends at school, and I was very aware that they knew the tales and legends of the village much better than my female friends, including me. The men had more tales than the women, maybe because the men walked out of the house and the women used to sit in the kitchen. But one strange thing about me was that I was really excited about the tales and legends of my village, contrary to the common *fetoraan*'s world of discussion.

After that, we hugged. I almost cried that night while hugging, and surely mama knew it. Everything was just sad, but one murmur from mama sparked my joy and hope. “You already have your *alin* inside my womb,” she tried to say very slowly and with a low voice. I heard it very clearly, and my eyes brightened, full of tears of joy. I was so happy to know that there would be a newborn baby in the family. What a joy for a sister who thought she would be the only daughter in the family. Moreover, I was about to leave and I hoped that my *alin* would bring new joy to the family, making the house alive again without me.

Honestly, I wanted that baby to be a boy (I did not know why, I just wanted it to be that way). I hoped that I would have the time to come back to the village once he was born. That day would be the best day of my life, I guess. And, of course, to visit him once a month (maybe), so that he did not forget that he had a *biin*.

Thus, with that dream, I traveled to Dili, a new and very strange place for a *fetoraan* like me. Everything was just out of my world.



My first impression of Dili was that it was a city of lights. As soon as the bus arrived in the city, everything caught my attention, especially the lights everywhere. I could not curb my curiosity and always looked around to

see the lights. If I had been a kid, I would have believed that these lights were the ones people called ‘stars’ in my village. But I was grown enough to differentiate them. Still, they were very much alike. And it would not be a fault even for a grown-up who had never been to a city to think that way. It was very normal.

I was informed that a *tiu* would be waiting for me to pick me up. papa said he was his friend from a long time ago before that *tiu* moved to the city. Other than that, I did not know much about papa’s friend. What I was sure of was that he would also be an old man just like papa.

The bus went around the city for more than an hour and finally arrived at a place where buses were everywhere, and the crowd was hectic. The *konjak* were everywhere shouting, looking for passengers who wanted to go back. Mama once told me that some of them were not really *konjak*, but robbers pretending to be *konjak* to steal people’s bags. Who would know the face of the robbers in the midst of the crowd, let alone catch them? Thus, I decided to stand in a corner waiting for papa’s friend. Suddenly, I began to doubt and feel nervous at the same time; how could that old man recognize me? Let alone I had not met him yet. I felt very nervous and sweated a lot.

One hour left, I stood in that corner waiting for a *tiu* I had never met before. I knew some *konjak* began to

notice me, and my fear was that they were robbers just like mama had told me. I could see that their attention slowly began to turn to me. I sweated even more and pretended to be normal so they would not notice. Should I ask them for help? I did not think so. That was a dangerous thought in a new place. It was not a good idea to trust anyone easily there. So, I continued my drama of pretending that I was not lost and that someone would come very soon to fetch me.

It was already midnight when I noticed that the place began to slowly empty. Some buses started to take off again, and almost all the passengers we traveled with had already left. The place was now filled with two buses that would travel the next morning, and some men sitting in the old house, talking and smoking cigarettes. The wind blew a little harder, and I felt cold, very cold.

After several minutes had passed, I noticed a yellow car enter the station. My eyes sparkled; I had a feeling that this would be papa's friend. I held my bag tightly as I felt very certain at that moment. My heart already felt happy even before I saw who was driving the car. I knew it certainly because no passengers were left in the station, only me. Who else could the driver possibly be fetching?

My intuition was even more accurate when the car approached in my direction and parked in front of me. I smiled at the closed window, as if the driver smiled at me

from inside the car with its black-tinted windows. I was certain that he smiled back at me, papa's friend.

Then, bang! Something hit me so hard on the back of my head. It felt like someone did it. My eyes began to blur and my whole body felt weak. The bag I held tightly with hope fell from my hands. I could feel my head trying hard to turn around to see, but it seemed like everything in me was not under my control at that moment. Everything in me slowly began to pause. I fell down desperately, and everything went black. I did not hear well, but I surely heard some noises like people talking, even with my eyes closed. I wanted to utter some words, but my lips were pale and unable to say a word, let alone shout for help. Then I felt strong arms lifting my weak body, placing me on a soft couch like that of a car, and the door was slammed. That's all; after that, nothing.

PART II

My eyes barely opened, but I could feel that I was slowly becoming conscious. I could move my eyeballs behind the eyelids and give my best to normalize everything. My whole body was still unmoved. At least I could move my eyeballs to convince my soul that I was still alive, and always alive as usual. Nothing so bad was happening to me.

After several minutes had passed, I began to notice the presence of my ears, hearing small noises around. It seemed like there were not many noises around, just a few noises maybe from afar, like footsteps and people chatting. Then, my nose smelled the air, which my mind said was not fresh at all. As I continuously inspected it, my memory brought me to a scene in the village. When, for the first time, I got vaccinated at school. Just a girl who feared almost everything new to her, just like the strange thing with the nail in it. I remembered how a poor girl cried a lot after the nail went through her skin as if she would die soon after that. But almost every girl was like this; crying many times in life even over small things. Maybe because their thoughts always exaggerated everything that happened to them, just like what I was feeling at that moment. My mind told me many, many things about my actual condition, but I kept refusing to care too much.

Does it mean I am in the hospital? Silently I considered this instant question.

But, how? Why? Just stopped asking those questions, and kept them to myself for a while.

The most important thing then was to be aware of the air I inhaled and exhaled. My mouth was still pale, and I thought it might also be dry. I just could not say any words, let alone ask the questions inside my head. Even if I could ask, I probably would not have known which question to begin with, as millions of questions flew around my mind.

Just then, I heard very clearly the door open, like someone was entering the room. The footsteps of that person, maybe a doctor, reminded me of the class; when teachers entered the class, the footsteps sounded just perfectly the same. I thought they wore the same kind of shoes. I was very attentive to every noise this person made; the direction he went and everything I could figure out in my mind even with my eyes closed. I could feel the anxiety in me; my respiration was not that stable, I noticed it. As if I was really curious to see that stranger with my eyes, I tried so hard at least to peek, but nothing happened—just red eyelids as walls to prevent me from seeing the world.

Is it the feeling of a blind person that I am feeling right now? Yes, it could be.

Then, suddenly, I heard the door shut again and the room went silent. There was no more noise in the room,

just tiny noises outside the room. The stranger had just left. I was happy that I remained untouched by anything, maybe because everyone thought I was still unconscious. But all of a sudden, I felt like something was crawling from my feet and fingers. It was cold. I began to feel cold, spreading from my feet and fingers. And my whole body began to feel the same. *What? Am I naked?* What a surprise in horror.

I was really certain that the answer to that question was ‘yes.’ So, all I could figure out was that I was naked, lying on a hard, flat surface alone in a room with the door closed. I was like a dead body to anyone who entered the room because I could not do anything with my body.

Death, no. I was very sure I was not dead. How could a dead person breathe, let alone think, ask questions, and sense the world around? I was not dead, but a *fetoraan* full of life who did not yet know what was happening to her, still wondering without much possibility of knowing.



Uff ... Iff ... I heard the noise very clearly, right next to me.

I knew instantly that this noise was from a person’s deep breath. I made sure my ears were more attentive to hear it once more. I was very sure someone had been right next to me for the last few minutes, quietly.

Observing me?

*Could it be that the stranger I thought had already left
was still here?*

I did not know, but my blood raced much faster at that moment. Since I was a girl in the camp, I had hated people watching me all the time; even at school, I hated standing in front of everyone. I just felt very awkward and insecure.

I tried not to drop a single bead of sweat, letting that person think I was still unconscious and his presence was unnoticed by this fearful girl. I tried to stay focused for several more minutes, but still, that noise did not come again.

I began to feel cooler when I sensed the presence of a third stranger in the room. The door opened again, and I heard shoes stepping on the floor with the familiar noise of a classroom. This time, the noise came towards me; I could feel it through the footsteps. They came closer and closer and stopped beside me. Then, another set of footsteps came from the door into the cool room. These, too, came towards me and stopped beside me.

“This *feto-aat* first,” one said to the other,

“Yeah,” the other answered.

Seemed like both of them were men. And “*feto-aat?*
Who is prostitute?”

I felt very bothered by this rude word. How could they utter this? And maybe there was a *fetoraan* like me beside me, perhaps lying naked too. The sound of the breath was maybe from her, feeling desperate just like me. But why did they call her a *feto-aat*? That made me so angry and puzzled. My whole being just wanted to wake up and kill my curiosity and anger.

And then, there was the noise of wheels, small wheels as I figured out. I had already heard it many times when papa was in the clinic back when he felt so ill that he just slept in the clinic for almost a month. I did not know exactly what illness it was, but that made him sleep in an old-looking bed with small wheels that the doctors could move around every time. Sometimes I also pushed the bed; it just felt satisfying as a girl. And I thought that *fetoraan* and I slept on the same bed that the two doctors were pushing. I heard that they pushed that bed with the “*feto-aat*” out of the room. Then, silence again filled the room. Now, I wondered if only both of us were in the room, or many more girls. If only two, then the next turn would certainly be mine. I just waited to hear the footsteps of these men, who could be doctors, come again, and I would be moved again outside that cool room.

After several minutes had passed, they came again with the same paces, and I was moved outside the cool room as well. All I could figure out was that there were

many rooms and maybe corridors like at school. As they pushed the bed with wheels, my eyes were very much disturbed by many lights, maybe in the corridors. My body was like that of a dead person, but my mind worked like I never imagined; I tried to figure out everything around me: the lights, the people chatting and laughing along the way. I didn't hear them talking clearly, but at least I could figure out the number of people in the strange place. Mostly, the voices were of men. And footsteps with shoes on, like it was really a big place. The smell remained the same—not that fresh, but like that of medications.

Then, we stopped somewhere with the same amount of light, yet it was a little less cool. In that new room, the noise became even less; the footsteps and chatting of the people outside were no longer heard. I could only hear a man, as I figured out, walking at a very slow pace. Some little noises began to catch my attention, like small objects made of steel. And then, that noise again from the girl next to me.

Uff ... Iff ... the girls was taking deep breath again.

I was very certain that a needle had just passed through the skin of my shoulder. It was a little painful, but what could a girl with a very weak body do? I just stayed relaxed until the needle was removed again without any resistance. Then, that one person in the room went out, shutting the door. At that time, I began to feel stronger.

My breath became more relieved, and my fingers started to make tiny movements, as well as my toes and eyes. It felt like the stones placed upon my eyelids were slowly being removed, and I felt lighter. I finally opened my eyes, and my vision slowly became clear from the blur. I was first disturbed by the light that was directed straight into my eyes. Then I saw the white ceiling, visualizing how large the room was. I tried to look to the right and left to see the girl next to me, but something was preventing me from doing so. Some kind of pillows were placed around my neck that prevented me from moving, making me face the ceiling. At that moment, I tried to remove those pillows and wake up, but then I realized that my wrists were tied up, just like my feet. I tried so hard to remove them, but I could not. Thus, I began to shout with as much energy as I had just regained, “*Ajuda, ajuda,*” desperately shouting for help.



“*Shisst ... Kalma, kalma.* Stay calm.”

The female voice next to me spoke slowly and clearly, as though she had no anxiety or fear. I could tell the voice was of a girl older than me.

Then she coughed, “they don’t listen outside,” she added “just don’t waste your energy too much.”

I shouted much louder, not caring about what that girl said, because all I knew was that I really needed help. Nothing more, nothing more, just *ajuda*.

“Hey,” she intervened again.

“Who are you?” I stopped shouting and turned my focus to her, that strange girl. She remained silent for a while and then said “Rosa. And you, little girl?”

I was disturbed by that title, “little girl,” but I tried my best to remain calm.

“Rita” then followed by an awkward silence. No one wanted to utter words; we were just as silent as the room.

“Why are we here?” I broke the silence between us.

“How do you come here?” she asked me back.

I thought for a while, realizing her question was more important than mine. Truly, I should figure out the how first, then the why.

“What is the last thing you remember before you are here?” she added.

I doubted at first whether to trust her, but since we were both girls lying naked on the hard plank, I felt safe enough to say it.

“I was in the bus station when someone, I guess, hit me so hard on the back of my head that I passed out,” I began to recount the little that I knew.

“Were you alone?”

“Yeah,” I answered, feeling a bit nervous and confused. At that moment, thoughts of papa and mama flooded

my mind. I felt very angry as their images appeared in my head. I hated them so much, yet at the same time, I wanted them to be with me and say something because I felt lost, truly lost.

“And you?” I asked her back, followed by moments of silence.

“I am a *feto-aat*,” she said, and I was extremely astonished to hear that word come from her own mouth. I never imagined a girl would describe herself so confidently that way. I felt conflicted, torn between pity and judgment. It was unimaginable.

“So, is this place for...”

“*Feto-aat sira*,” she immediately interrupted my question.

“What? But I am not that type of girl. I am not a prostitute. Who told you I am a girl like you? We have never met once, how come...” I was just an angry, poor girl claiming my innocence. I began to cry as I complained about everything that happened to me.

“Why should they tie me up? And naked? Why?” I shouted without thinking twice. She just remained silent, making me feel like no one ever heard or cared about me.

“So, what do you think? Please tell them once they come and let me go home!” I shouted at her as if she were deaf.

"I once was just a girl like you," she said, maintaining her calm voice.

"No," I shouted. "You are not. We are very different. Don't ever compare me to you!" I started to complain again, neglecting her.

Then, suddenly, the door opened. Two men, most likely those who had pushed our bed, came walking inside: tall, with masks on and white cloaks like doctors. But they were the kind of doctors that took care of the *feto-aat*. They were not doctors at all, just something else. I shouted at them with every question that was in my head. They were silent and just looked at me without any reaction. They did not care much about the girl beside me, only about me. Then, all of a sudden, they happily started to untighten my wrists and feet. I slowly began to calm, but I couldn't; I shouted again, even louder. I was feeling very stressed that they did not say a word in response to my anger and dissatisfaction.

And finally untightened, I immediately woke up, seeing my naked body. I tried to cover myself, but I didn't care much since they had already seen me. Then, I slapped one of the men standing in front of me with all my strength. I noticed their anger, and I was happy to see that they cared about what I was doing. They held my hands firmly on both sides and led me out of the room. I glanced at the girl next to me; she was also naked and

tied up like I had been. Then, they brought me outside as I continued to shout and struggle to be freed. Everybody outside the room, along the corridor, didn't seem to care. They walked on their own, some continuing to chat without feeling bothered. They all wore the same cloaks with masks on and black shoes that made a sound. Everyone was literally a man. In the garage, there was a car with a big closed box in the back, unlike a bus. It was a cargo truck. They threw me into that box naked and in the dark. They locked the doors. Inside, I kept beating the surface of the big box. It was made of metal, but my hands were nothing compared to it. I just wanted to be heard and freed.

Then, a minute later, that girl followed me into the dark big box at the back of the car. I noticed that she was so kind, like obedient, not defensive at all. She climbed inside and sat in the corner, while I was still shouting as loud as I could. Then, the engine started. The car drove off, and I fell terribly. I could sense that the car was driving very fast, and I couldn't even stand. So, I crawled into another corner opposite the girl. I sat, with my hands covering my face, crying. Both of us were just hopeless; the difference was that she expressed it in another way.

After several hours in the dark box, I fell asleep. The image of papa and mama crossed my mind again, and that woke me up immediately. As I opened my eyes, I saw that we were still in the same big iron box, but a little ray

of light came through a small hole at the top of the car, like a small window just for air circulation. It made the room a little bit brighter. I could see the girl more clearly. Rosa, I still remembered her name, and so I called her out.

“Yes, Rita,” she still remembered my name. I resolved to crawl to her, searching for company and curiously wanting to know what was going on, as it seemed not unfamiliar to her. She must know something about what is happening.

I inched closer to her and sat beside her. Her hair was a little messy, covering half of her face. At least I could recognize her face a little—a girl with a gentle face and smile, a little hopeless in her words, but not in her skin and breath. Her presence almost reminded me of mama. It gave me comfort.

“It must be night already outside,” she said, directing my attention to the lights coming through the tiny holes.

“Yeah, I guess” I responded.

“It must be night already outside,” she said, directing my attention to the lights coming through the tiny holes.

She touched my cheek gently, “Not *feto-aat*, but a girl that dreams, right?” I remained silent. There was something true about what she was saying at that moment, so I just wanted to listen attentively to what she had to say.

The light of the city helped us see each other a little more clearly. Sitting side by side, we began to have small talks. I learned that her age was not that different from mine, just five years older. She was twenty-five years old. I could say she was beautiful—the round face, the smile, and, of course, how she talked. What a beauty and gentle soul.

“I am not from Díli,” she said. Surprisingly, she had many things in common with me. She was also born somewhere in the *foho* district. I couldn’t remember the name of the district, but as I listened to her stories about her hometown, I realized how surprisingly similar our experiences were. She was a girl who chased butterflies just like me; a girl who went to school in sandals; and a girl who ate in the kitchen. What a coincidence. As she shared her story, I found it very easy to chime in because everything resonated.

I could see that she was a smart girl. I guessed she was also the topper at her school, but I didn’t ask. She told me that her favorite subject was math, the subject I was really into. I remembered the moment when I was slapped by the math teacher because I didn’t know seven times two. She laughed as I recounted this story. She was really good in math, she said humbly. As for me, I didn’t really know what my favorite subject was; I just knew that I hated math class and the teacher. Maybe my favorite subject was listening to the tales of our jungle,

and my favorite teacher was papa.

We laughed a lot as we talked about our families. I felt a bit jealous when she mentioned that her father was just as close to her as her mother. That was very different from my experience. I wished the same thing could happen to me, to have papa nearby. She had a good family, actually. And maybe that's why she was also a very good girl.

Just as we came to the main part of the story that I really wanted to know—how she came to become a girl that I never imagined—the car suddenly stopped. The abrupt brake made us crash into each other. Her head hit hard on the wall, and I guessed it caused her a lot of pain. She got up and fixed her hair, and at that moment, I saw for the first time the black shadow around her left eye, as if she had been punched by someone. The mark was still new, like it had recently happened. She quickly covered it again with her hair.

“What happened to you?” I asked, knowing she was trying to hide something from me. I felt both pity and anger for her trying to conceal the pain. I held her arms and shook her, asking the same question again. She just smiled and tried to convince me that she was perfectly okay.

“I am okay,” she added.

“Don't worry Rosa.”

Then she smiled gently and removed my hands from her arms. I still couldn't believe her words; all I knew was that she was surely not okay, and something had happened to her a few days ago. Something inhuman. There was something to do with the strange place and the people with masks that I knew she knew very well. This made me even more curious.

Suddenly, some noise came from the door as if someone was unlocking it. "First station," she said slowly to me.

"What is that?" I intervened, feeling anxious and curious.

"We will stay here for a night," she said. As I heard it, I knew I had something to question, but for the first time, I decided not to question it and just conform to the situation.

As the door opened, a man standing outside threw our clothes to us. They were the clothes they had removed from us earlier. I took mine and she took hers as well. I noticed blood on her clothes, which made me certain about the reason behind the mark on her left eye. They had done something to her, and I might find out very soon. It would answer some of the questions in my head.

Then, the guy accompanied us into another house. This time, the house was so big and luxurious. I had never seen such a fancy house before. I noticed that the house

was not so remote; there were some houses nearby. As I walked behind, I couldn't help but try my best to scan the place. None of us was defensive at that time; I resolved to be quiet yet active inside my head. There were not as many people as at the previous place. Not everyone had masks on; some were smoking along the corridor, and some were chatting next to the cars. I felt a little bit more confident because this time I had my clothes on. But I was still a little nervous, as they were all men.

After several paces, he led us to a room, a little room where the color was solely white. The walls, ceiling, and tiles were all white. It was a little luxurious for me as a girl from *foho*. There were three chairs around a table in the middle, and they were white too. Both of us sat down, and the man left the room, shutting the door. She had her head down and remained calm. But I couldn't help feeling very uncomfortable; I noticed my hands starting to tremble a little. I guessed that if I talked, my voice would tremble too.

A minute later, a man with a mask came into the room in a hurry, bringing a pack of biscuits and two bottles of water. He placed them carefully on the table and left. Rosa immediately grabbed the biscuits and ate them quickly. It seemed like she hadn't eaten for days. She ate quickly until only two pieces of biscuit were left in the pack, then she drank the water like a thirsty bird finding a well in the middle of the desert. She even

grabbed the bottle hard while drinking. Then, I started to eat mine and drank. In fact, I also hadn't eaten anything for almost a day. But fortunately, I was not as hungry as that poor girl. I could bear it with three biscuits and a bottle of water for the night.



We sat there in the empty white room for hours. I was very sleepy, just like her. I wanted to continue talking about the issue in the car, but I saw that she was not in a good mood at that moment. She just looked down quietly. Then, I resolved to sleep on the table by placing my hands on it as pillows. I slept but remained vigilant, listening for anything that might happen.

Then I was bothered by the sound of a bell and woke up instantly. I found her sleeping too, with her head on the table. I couldn't help but wake her up to ask what was happening. I was happy that she woke up in a good temper.

"Nothing, just the workers' schedule," she said quickly, as if she wanted to go back to sleep again.

"Who are they?" I asked her with a suspicious voice.

"What do they do?" I added. She remained silent and didn't say a word. I shook her hand to wake her up.

"What is this place? What happened to you, and us?" I asked repeatedly.

She then got up, fixing her hair. She tied it back, letting her whole face appear. The wound mark on her left eye became clear to my sight. She looked at me unmoved, pointing to her left eye with her finger.

“I had been here before,” she said, and I remained silent, letting her continue the story.

“Eleven of us were here in this room,” she added, “just like both of us now.”

I intervened to ask what exactly happened to them.

“Two days more, you will find out,” she answered without even smiling as usual.

Actually, I hated people talking mysteriously like that, but I resisted my anger out of curiosity. I had to know what was happening right at that moment.

Then, with tears, she began to recall the events that had happened to her and her friends. Truly, it was the continuation of the story she had started in the car. She recalled when she and her sister came to Dili a few years ago and had an incident that changed her life forever. Maybe not her entire life, but certainly the direction of it. It was in the middle of the jungle when their bus was stopped by a group of people with masks on, and some even had armor in their hands. They stood in the middle of the road that night with their cars. “It was about three black cars,” she recalled.

“They threatened the driver first. Then, two men with pistols climbed onto the bus and inspected everyone. I remembered there was an older man who stood up to lament their presence. It seemed like he was a man who worked in an office. The rest of us just stayed silent. The image of a mother with her son is still fixed in my mind as I recount this. It’s still very vivid in my eyes. The mother held her son tightly with her right hand and used her other hand to cover his mouth. They sat right next to me and my sister.”

“I remembered the conversation we had before the incident; the mother said they were traveling to meet her husband after two years of being apart. He had left to find work in the city. I was really moved by her excitement, and even more so by her son’s joy; what a delight it must have been for him to see his father after two years.”

“My eyes kept on them, and I tried not to make too much movement so that I wouldn’t be noticed. I really had no idea what was happening. Were they looking for some specific person? Who were they? And the pistols, were they police officers? In the end, I didn’t know. I just remembered that something really happened to me that night, and it changed me forever.”

She paused for a while, followed by an awkward silence between us. I noticed that when she recalled the story, she never made eye contact with me; she just

stared down at the floor. I didn't really know the reason, but I had seen it with mama. When mama and I sat in the kitchen, sharing her quarrels with papa, she would stare down as well, not looking directly into my eyes. Sometimes she cried, and I could see the tears falling to the dust.

"They then ordered the girl passengers to stand up," she continued. "At first, no one stood. Then they started pointing the gun at every girl on the bus, saying rude words."

Hamriik! Stand! they shouted.

"Then all of a sudden, some girls in the front row started to stand, followed by a few more. At this time, I was very skeptical, but luckily, I had my sister by my side, holding my hand tightly as if she didn't want me to stand. I just stared down, just like my sister. My heart began to pound quickly, and I started to sweat. I looked to the right and saw the mother with her son trembling. Everyone was quiet, even the men inside."

"Ida tan! One more!" they shouted

"Fetoraan sanulu! We need ten girls!"

This time, I was terribly full of fear, noticing that maybe only three girls were left who hadn't stood yet: my sister, the mother, and me. I looked into my sister's eyes, and I knew she understood what I was trying to tell her. It had to be one of us, not the mother.

Her voice trembled as she recounted the moment. “I knew that the next decision would change everything,” she said, her eyes reflecting the fear and tension that had gripped her during those agonizing moments. The room felt heavy with the weight of the story, and I could sense the gravity of the situation they had faced. Each word she spoke painted a vivid picture of the fear and uncertainty that had loomed over them like a dark cloud, ready to burst at any moment.

I stayed silent, listening intently, knowing that this was her way of coping with the traumatic memories. I wanted to understand, to be there for her, and to help carry the burden of her past. The minutes felt like hours as she continued to unravel the events that had forever changed her life.

“Me or my sister?” I thought, but just quickly. The weight of the decision bore down on me, and I could feel the urgency of the moment intensifying. My mind raced, but I knew I had to act fast. The tension was almost unbearable as I tried to process the situation and make a choice that could potentially save us.

With every passing second, the reality of the danger we were in became clearer. The masked men, the guns, the fear in everyone’s eyes—it was all too real. My sister’s hand tightened around mine, grounding me in that terrifying moment. I had to protect her, no matter what.

“Then my sister got up. My hand still held hers tightly, with tears starting to accumulate in my eyes. I cried silently,” she recounted, her voice trembling with emotion.

I could see the pain and fear etched on her face as she relived that moment. The room felt heavy with the weight of her story, and I couldn’t help but feel a deep sense of empathy for her and her sister. The courage it must have taken for her sister to stand up in that terrifying situation was immeasurable.

As she continued her story, I listened intently, wanting to be there for her in any way I could. The bond between her and her sister was evident, and I knew that their love for each other had given them the strength to face such a harrowing experience.

Rosa cried in the present moment, her breath rushed. She wiped away the tears and covered her eyes. Without my awareness, tears began to fall on my cheeks as well. I inched closer to her and sat next to her, placing my hand on her back to console her.

The room was filled with the weight of her emotions, and I could feel the depth of her pain. I wanted to be there for her, to offer any comfort I could. The bond we shared in that moment was unspoken but strong, as we both navigated through the memories and emotions of the past.

“I just couldn’t hold my love for her. I stood next to her with tears,” she continued, her voice breaking with emotion.

Her story had a profound impact on me, and I felt a deep sense of empathy and connection. I gently placed my hand on her shoulder, offering what little comfort I could. The bond we shared in that moment was unspoken but powerful, as we navigated through the pain and memories together. It was clear that her love for her sister was immense, and the trauma they had endured had only strengthened their connection.

I stayed by her side, listening intently, ready to support her as she continued to share her story.

“My sister was a little worried, trying to get me to sit by pulling my hand down, but I resisted. First, I didn’t want her to leave me alone; whatever happened to her, I wanted to be with her. Second, I didn’t know where to go without her by my side,” she continued, her voice steady but filled with emotion.

The bond between the two sisters was clear, and the love and support they had for each other in such a dire situation were both heartbreaking and inspiring. The room was silent as she shared her story, the weight of her words sinking in.

I remained by her side, offering what comfort I could, knowing that sometimes just being present can make all

the difference. The connection between us grew stronger with every word she spoke, and I felt honored to be a part of her journey, even if just as a listener and a friend.

“So both of us stood, and I could hear the men with guns laughing, saying some words to tease my stupidity, but I didn’t care. After that, they took us into the car. They asked us not to bring anything with us. There were eleven of us. Later, they transported us to the place and entered the cold room,” she recounted.

The weight of her story hung in the air, and I could feel the trauma of the experience settling in. The fear, the uncertainty, and the feeling of helplessness were all palpable. I stayed close to her, offering silent support, knowing that just being there for her could make a difference.

The room around us felt even colder as she shared her memories. The silence between us was filled with the gravity of her words, and I knew that this moment was a crucial part of her journey towards healing. I held onto her story, feeling the weight of it, and vowed to be there for her, no matter what came next.

“That cold room where we were?” I asked, and she nodded.

“What about the vaccination?” My curiosity began to arise.

“Not vaccination. It was something else,” she said in a hopeless voice.

“My sister was with me everywhere we went. She was a doctor, so she knew something about that,” she continued.

“What did she say?” I asked, leaning toward her.

“It was to make our bodies weak,” she said, her voice filled with resignation.

We both fell silent for a while. I began to check my body, trying to figure out if there were any differences since I had been injected with that medication. I didn’t notice too much of a change, and I didn’t understand why.

The weight of her words hung in the air, and the realization of what had been done to us began to sink in. The fear, confusion, and uncertainty were overwhelming, but I knew we had to stay strong and find a way to navigate through this together.

I looked at her, seeing the pain and exhaustion in her eyes. We had been through so much, and there were still so many questions left unanswered. I knew we had to find a way to uncover the truth and protect ourselves from whatever lay ahead.

“We all got the needle into our skin the next day, but what makes you different from all of us is your bravery,”

she said, this time lifting her head and looking into my eyes.

“You are really a brave girl. You fight for what you believe to be true. That moves my heart. You make me reborn the little girl in me. The girl who dreams of great things and is full of life.”

I was frozen to hear that.

Her words left me speechless, and the weight of her admiration and gratitude filled the room. It was a profound moment, one that connected us on a deeper level. Despite the fear and uncertainty, there was a sense of hope and resilience that emerged from her story. The courage she saw in me mirrored the strength she had within herself, and it was a reminder of the power of love and determination.

“I think I just met the young me. You are very alike to me before everything changed. A girl with hope,” she said, her voice filled with emotion.

She hugged me so gently, and I was deeply moved by her words. We hugged each other for a while, finding comfort in the embrace. In fact, both of us were hugging our own selves; she hugged the young version of her, and I hugged my uncertainty.

★

The next morning, we were awakened by the sound of the bell. Both of us had slept side by side that night.

For a minute, the door opened and footsteps approached us. What confused me was that my head felt incredibly heavy, and I could barely see anything clearly. I scratched my eyes, but it made no difference. My whole body felt the same, as if my shoulders were carrying something heavy on them.

She noticed my struggle and murmured, “It is okay,” as if she knew what was happening to me.

Her reassurance helped, but the heaviness in my body and the fog in my mind were unsettling. The footsteps drew closer, and the uncertainty of what was to come weighed heavily on me. Despite the fear and confusion, I held onto her words, finding some solace in the fact that she was by my side and seemed to understand the situation better than I did.

“The medication?” I mumbled, noticing my words were barely coherent. Everything felt heavy and overwhelming. She didn’t answer my question, but her expression seemed to say yes.

The men asked us to get up and follow them. I could hear their voices, but I couldn’t move my body. I was really weak. So, they resolved to lift me out of the room. I didn’t know if Rosa walked on her own or not, because everything in me was about to shut down. I felt my body being carried through the corridors, like going out to the big dark box again. They threw me into the car,

and I heard the sound of the door's key tinkling. I barely opened my eyes, and everything went dark.

Then, I felt a motherly hand lifting my head and placing it on her leg. She fixed my hair and comforted me as a baby to sleep. I slept, sensing the car driving again. As I slept, images slid through my mind: papa, mama, the teachers at school, friends, the butterflies in the camp, the shepherds with their herd, and everything about the girl from foho just appeared in my head.

The vivid memories of my past played out like a film, providing some comfort amid the fear and uncertainty. The warmth of the motherly hand and the familiar images in my mind helped me to hold on to hope, even in such a dark and terrifying moment.

*

The sudden brake jolted me awake, and I slowly opened my eyes. My head was still resting on her leg. She was sleeping, her head leaning against the wall, and I could see how tired she was too. I tried to get up, but my head still felt heavy, so I decided to stay lying on her leg. At least my sight had recovered by then.

I looked at her face, seeing the beauty and strength in her. Even amidst all the fear and uncertainty, there was still a spark of life and hope in her eyes. I could sense the fire within her, the same fire that had fueled her dreams and desires before everything changed. That little fire of

hope refused to die, and I wanted nothing more than to help her reignite it.

As I lay there, I smiled with great joy in my heart. I could see mama in her face, and I felt a deep sense of love and connection. She loved me.

I moved my head a little, and she slowly noticed it. She opened her eyes, seeing me staring at her.

“Ouhh, are you feeling better?” she asked with worry, placing her hand on my cheek. I almost cried; the tears were full in my eyes.

“Rita, don’t worry,” she consoled me. “Be strong, okay?” She tried her best to convince my poor, miserable soul that everything was okay.

In fact, my tears were from feeling loved, not from suffering. Indeed, love can surpass every pain of humankind; I do believe that with all my heart. Is love the best feeling a person can experience? I would say yes.

“What is her name?” I asked.

“My sister?” I nodded. “Rita. Just like yours,” she answered with a gentle smile.

“She was a brave woman. At least she was the one who knew the world first in our family. She came to the city when I was just a little girl and later became a doctor. She then decided to work in a clinic in our village, curing

people, giving them hope and joy.” She looked blankly at the wall as she recalled.

“When I got out of the school, I would go to the clinic, seeing her,” she added, “what a joy for a girl to see her sister seriously taking care of another people. I felt joy. Like I wanted to be like her when I grew up; to be a useful person for other people; to laugh together with the people in pain.”

“A girl who dreams, right?” I intervened.

“Uhhh,” she nodded in agreement. She smiled without looking into my eyes.

“My father once told me the story of a young girl who every day would go to the camp to chase butterflies. Most of the time, she never caught even one among the thousands of butterflies flying over the fragrant flowers, but at the end of the day, her mother always witnessed her coming back from the camp running with a smile on her face,” she added. “Her mother would ask her if she ever caught one, and her answer was always ‘yes.’ Surprisingly, her mother never once asked her little daughter to show her the butterflies she had caught because she knew that what her daughter was chasing was not butterflies at all.”

I immediately cut in, “Truly, what she was chasing was the joy; the smile on her face.” She nodded and added, “So the butterflies are just a metaphor for her happiness. What the mother truly wanted to ask her daughter at the

end of the day was whether she was happy or not, and the smile on her tiny face meant more than what she would have answered.”

“I felt that,” I smiled

“Yeah,” she smiled back.

“So, what are your butterflies?” I asked, knowing it might be sudden for her to answer.

“When I was a girl, I had so many butterflies to chase every day in this vast camp,” she replied, her eyes beginning to brighten.

“I can imagine how excited that little girl was chasing her butterflies,” she began, closing her eyes a bit while talking with a gentle smile on her face. “That little girl had so many great dreams kept deep in her soul.”

“What were they, if I may know?” I interrupted, eager to hear more.

“Many. So many dreams, and great they were. But...” she paused for a moment, deep in thought. “The greatest of all was to be like my sister, a doctor.” I noticed her expression changed when she mentioned it. She seemed to feel a bit sad talking about this.

“Are they still alive?” I asked

“What?”

“The *butterflies*”

Her forced smile and avoidance told me that this was a sensitive topic for her. I could sense the weight of unspoken emotions behind her words.

“I believe they are,” I said gently, trying to reassure her. “Alive?” she asked back without looking into my eyes, her voice lacking genuine conviction. She smiled again, but it was clear she was struggling.

“Rosa,” I called her attention to look into my eyes.

“Rosa,” I repeated again. Her face transformed into a version I had never seen before—full of stress, depression, loss, hopelessness, and anger. I could see her clenching her teeth inside her mouth; it was noticeable from the tension in her jaw.

“Listen, my sister,” I insisted, my voice gentle but firm. “They are truly still alive. Those butterflies are still flying in your camp.”

“Do you know why? Because you still keep your garden growing beautifully. The flowers in your garden still keep their fragrance, which keeps the butterflies from going far.”

It seemed like my words were slowly reaching her, even if she tried to keep her emotions in check. Her breath began to quicken, and I could sense that some of what I was saying was truly touching her soul.

“Your smile, gentleness, kind heart, and loving care are the fragrant flowers that keep the butterflies in your

garden, in your life,” I continued, hoping to reinforce the positive qualities she possessed. “Those qualities are what make you special and keep your dreams and hopes alive, even in the darkest times.”

“Just that little girl. Just that little girl who lost her joy in chasing butterflies. She thought that chasing butterflies didn’t give her joy anymore. That’s why she now just sat in the middle of the garden, feeling sad for nothing. That’s it.”

After I said this, there was a long silence between us. She still kept her eyes open, wondering, looking blankly at the wall.

“So, to be happy is a decision?” she broke the silence.

“Yes, to get up and chase again the *butterflies* is a decision,” I said, and she was processing what she just heard.

“What if the *butterflies* are no more in my reach?” she replied, and that time she finally looked down to my eyes, even with stoic face.

“That girl in the camp finds joy in chasing the butterflies, not in catching one of them,” I spoke metaphorically, hoping she would understand what I meant.

She did get it; certainly, she was older than me, and her wisdom shone through.

“Catching one makes you lose a thousand others,” I continued. “But not having one in your hand makes the thousand yours.”

She smiled a little, but then her expression returned to being stoic and emotionless.

She held my hand tightly and looked into my eyes gently. “What you said is true, Rita. Sometimes I feel that too. I know very well that thousands of butterflies are still flying in my garden. I know they are alive. Only, I do not want to be that little girl anymore.”

I continued to keep my mouth closed, staying silent so that I could listen to her fully.

“You know, I just can’t,” her voice changed, a well of tears formed in her eyes. She began to cry, and I still stayed silent on my own.

“It hurts, Rita. It hurts so badly for this girl to get up again and chase her butterflies.” She continued crying.

“I had tried many times to get up again, but it seemed impossible. I was lost and did not know what to do with life.”

“This girl had nothing to chase anymore, so she sat alone in her garden, enjoying the beauty and fragrance of the flowers. Then, sometimes, she tried her best not to care too much about the butterflies that began slowly to fly away.” She really spoke with her heart, I noticed.

"I start to feel okay with it." She said followed by a forced smile.

"No, you are not." I interfered

"You are not okay with it" I noticed her hand started to hold my hand tighter.

"We have to do something about this," I said again, placing another hand on hers. "None of us here is alone. We can do this together; get up and chase our butterflies again."

She remained silent. She then moved her lips as if it sounded impossible. But I was sure that everything I had just spoken was more than just blank words, I really meant it.

I tried at that time to get up from her legs, as I felt a little bit stronger. She was always worried about me, making sure that I was really okay. So I got up and sat beside her, leaning my head on the wall. Both of us were in silence, inhaling every breath with the weight of the words that had come out of our mouths. After an hour, there was a sudden break, and we arrived in another place.

"Second station," she said.

PART III

We stayed in the second station for a night as well. I felt more comfortable in that station because we were placed in an ordinary room, unlike the previous one, where everything was white for no reason. It was just awkward for me. We ate another pack of biscuits, but this time they gave us two, maybe due to the long distance. I was so grateful for that, and I ate a lot, just like her. I knew she noticed it as she smiled at me while both of us rushed to eat the biscuits.

In that room, she recounted everything about herself and the reason behind the black shadow in her left eye.

“So, at that moment, eleven of us finally got to the third station, the final station. Everything was very unexpected there. It was almost like a small city full of lights, loud music everywhere, and strange people dancing and singing. It felt like a party,” she recalled, her voice filled with a mix of awe and confusion.

“We were then led to a room inside a big building. There, a man came in unmasked, looking very ordinary. My eyes widened as I realized that the man was the driver of the bus we were on. All eleven of us recognized his face clearly. He even smiled at us. We just found out that the driver was one of the people working inside this strange group. What a cruel world!”

“He held a small bottle in his right hand, similar to the ones I’ve seen in the clinic used to keep pills. And

it turned out to be that way. There were pills inside that small bottle. He ordered us to stand in line and placed a pill in each of our hands. On his command, he forced each of us to swallow them. They were red in color and looked very much like the ordinary pills given by doctors, but I was certain that they were not; quite the opposite, in fact.

I had learned from a young age that it is almost impossible for a flower to grow in stony soil. Just like those pills, I could not believe that they were given to us for a good reason.”

“And it turned out to be true! After got swallowed, everything went dark; the darkness that separates me from the light forever,” she stopped for a while to take breath before continued.

“After that, we all woke up in a different world; a world that was previously very strange to us. It was a world of loud music and lights, of drinks and drugs, of money and gratification. A world of cigarettes, a world of sleeping with strangers who don’t even know your name. A world where all the girls have the same nickname. A world where you feel alive only in the darkness, because it is reigned by the darkness. And a world where you are afraid to die and live at the same time.”

“Your sister Rita?” I asked gently, hoping not to hurt her with my question.

“She is still my sister after all,” she continued. “A sister who loved me so much. I never noticed even a small difference in her love for me. She still loved me that much that I didn’t really feel lost in the dark world.”

I felt deeply touched by her words and leaned in to listen more.

“Truly, people say love always wins, even in the hardest battles. I felt that!”

“Every night, I was so lucky that we still had time to sit together and talk. I noticed that we did not talk too much about family, because we knew how much it would hurt us. We just did not want that to happen.”

As she spoke, an image of papa and mama popped up in my head. It felt like the same thing I was facing. I tried my best to ignore it and focus back on her story.

“Five months, six months went on, and I noticed something new among us: we began to bring bottles with us; then cigarettes; and once a month, we had a small sack of cocaine together.”

At this moment, my mind felt chaotic; I still couldn’t believe how life could change so quickly, almost in the blink of an eye. I felt deep pity for her life, her sister, and their circumstances. I couldn’t imagine how this could happen to such a nice girl—a girl who truly deserved the world’s favor, not its cruelty.

“You know what, Rita,” she turned to me a bit and continued the story, “people used to think that those who drink alcohol, smoke cigarettes, and consume drugs are the type of people who don’t respect their lives, and by doing so, they will have their lives cut short,” then she paused, and continued, “but it is not what it seems. It was quite the contrary for us. We did those things as a form of respect for our lives. Indeed, we did them so that we could live to see the next day. Because without them, we would be invaded by loneliness, lost, stress, depression, hopelessness, and all the things that would make us feel unworthy and better off ending our lives right then and there.”

My eyes brightened as I heard that. I had never thought of these things before. All this time, I had just judged the lives of other people without even the smallest interest in knowing what was behind these so-called valueless people.

It is very important to walk a mile with a person before making any assumptions about them. Not just walk, but talk with them, listen to their story, and in the end, we would be a little bit kinder to that person.

No one ever wanted to be a bad person. No one ever hated their life so much that they wouldn’t seek water when they are thirsty or wash their blood when they bleed. The very same thing happens to a prostitute. There

must be something behind the curtain that we should consider before uttering a word or even thinking of judging.

We just do not know every person's story well enough.

What were the burdens he was lifting? What was his family situation? The responsibility? The wounds? Traumas? And so on. We did not know much about such things; what we saw were just the superficial aspects of that person. Thus, we needed to be a little kinder whenever we met other people.

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"Everything went that way. Until one day, I kind of had some windows to escape."

The story began to be more intense. "Every year, there was a rich guy who organized a big party outside the city. He would arrange a very fancy and luxurious party for days in a hotel out of the city. For sure, there must have been some reason why it was held outside the city," I nodded.

And then she continued, "Surely they took some girls from our tiny world to be there as well. Not all, but some who were on their radar. My sister and I were lucky in the first year because we were not the target, probably because we were inexperienced. None of the eleven of us

was chosen. But in the second year, no one was confident enough to say that everything would be the same as the last year.”

“We began to notice some officers often coming to ask about our condition, as if they wanted to know us for some purpose. We all knew that something was going to happen, yet no one ever spoke out about it. In our facial expressions, we knew that we all had the same understanding.”

“But I was really indifferent at that time,” her eyes blinked twice in quick succession as she recalled it.

“I was a little bit crazy, but not so crazy that I couldn’t see the light in the middle of darkness. For me, it could be an opportunity to get out of that dark world. So, I shared my thoughts with my sister, hoping that she could also see it,” she smiled.

I smiled too. I didn’t know why, but every time she talked about her sister, something sparked my soul. Maybe it was because I was also a sister to my younger brother, who I once dreamt of visiting very often.

“So it turned out that that day came on time,” she recalled.

“We were ordered to stand up in line just the same as on our first day in that place. Then, a man came with a paper in his right hand. He was new to me; I had never

seen him around before, but I would admit that he was a good-looking guy. He stood for a while in front of us and scanned everyone's faces. That time was not the same as the first day; we all had our faces up—no shame or fear. But for me, I was a little bit nervous.”

I was curious about her story. “Because I had my sister with me. I feared that moment would separate us. And moreover, about the plan of running away. That would be a risky plan; if both of us were chosen simultaneously, then everything would run as intended. But if only one was chosen, then it would be a very different case to face.”

“I talked about that possibility the previous night, and she said that if only she were chosen, then she promised not to try to escape, because she knew that I would be a victim of her actions. She did not want that to happen. I could see how much she truly meant it when she spoke like that. But,” she continued, her voice slightly nervous, “she said that if I were the one to be chosen, then she begged me to continue with the plan: to escape.

The first time I heard it from her mouth, I immediately cried and bit her so hard many times. I was angry and overwhelmed at the same time. I was angry because of how easily she thought it would be for me to leave her behind.”

“That’s not going to happen! I am not selfish,” I shouted at her, yet she remained calm as if she had

already figured this out many times before she decided to speak up.

I was also overwhelmed, not because of anything else, but because of her love for me that I could not even imagine anymore.

How can love turn people into being brave enough to sacrifice everything, even their own life, for others? I felt that very deeply, even though I didn't really know what was going on in her mind.

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"I did not know how many of us would be chosen, yet I knew only some would be chosen. Why should they spy on us if they intended to choose us all? So, the man looked at the list and was about to announce the names with some codes allotted to us. I did not understand the meaning of those codes, but I knew that the ones for my sister and me were very much alike, with only the last number being different: hers was F784, and mine was F785."

"For a moment, he started to call out the names and the codes. It had been five girls called out, but none of us were chosen. I was really nervous that I almost bit my own lips."

"Two more," he said, leafing to the next page. He smiled and looked directly in my direction, then into my sister's as well.

“Two sisters,” he pointed two fingers at us with a playful voice, and all the other officers at the back laughed so loudly, as if it was a really good joke. Both of us looked at each other with plain faces, but deep inside, we knew that this was a good start for the plan,” she blinked her eyes again, and I couldn’t help but let my curiosity burn to listen to more and more of the continuation of that story.

“I could sense how my friends felt so much pity for both of us, for being in the party as sisters. I bet some of them thought about how cruel the world was to us, being from the same blood. As we walked ahead to follow that good-looking guy, I could hear the small noises behind us—the murmurs and gossip. As I turned right, I took a quick look at four of them; some were crying silently, I guess. I didn’t really notice their eyes, but I guessed it because even though we didn’t come from the same blood, we came from the same root, the same cause that led us to that one place, that strange dark place.”

Again she moved her lips slightly. “They probably thought it was a sad look, but for me, it was a look full of hope, knowing that sooner or later I would be somewhere else no matter what it took. Because stepping out of that tiny dark world circled by high walls, there would be plenty of windows and doors opened for us to choose to be free.”

“We stepped out of the building, and every eye outside was on us, feeling happy that they were not as unfortunate as we were. But in fact, all the girls inside that place were unfortunate. Maybe they would say they were less unfortunate compared to us. It could be true at some point, but not for both of us. Because we knew that among these girls, two were seeing themselves as prisoners who were released from prison.”

She smiled at me as she told the story, her eyes sparkling as if she wanted me to take note of it.

“As we were driven on, outside the car, we could hear the boos echoing in the building, witnessing our unluckiness. I still remember my sister sitting right beside me in the car, the same car that we were in; a big dark box at the back with only a small kind of window, just for the air and a little light.”

“She choked me and smiled at me, and I smiled back at her. She nodded her head slowly. At some instant, as I saw the girls around us with sad faces, I really wanted to tell them the good news of the opportunity to escape through this party, but as I signaled to my sister, she signaled ‘no’. I understood that it was really risky to spoil any good plan early. First, because some of them would possibly ruin it in some way; second, I wondered about the possibility of some spy girls inside the car noticing every move and talk of ours. I was pretty sure about it.”

“How intelligent those sisters were,” I thought in my head as I enjoyed hearing their tactic. They truly could see the light in the middle of the darkness. I guessed not all people could do this, let alone when they were accustomed to living in the darkness. I thought what made them that wise was that they did not lose hope whatever it took. They always kept the fire of hope inside them burning alive and never extinguished. Truly, hope gives people life in their agony. I was so astonished by their effort to keep that fire alive. Probably because they had time to sit and talk together about life, even if it seemed useless to do so. Those who love life always find a way to live it wherever and whenever.

“After more than eight hours, the car took a break; it was at the destination. I noticed along the way, none of us uttered a word out of our mouths. Just sitting, wondering on our own. It made me believe that everyone had her own world that made her not feel lonely whenever she was indeed alone. Just to visit that world to feel comfortable, cared for, and loved. Yes, there must have been love inside this world that made us human beings.”

She continued telling the story with a very good flow, and I sat there almost seeing with my bare eyes everything she described right in front of me, as if it were happening right at that moment. At some point, I really felt the same feelings in the story: fear, anxiety, hopelessness, forced happiness, loss, the desire to not go back, and impatience.

I also felt the good feelings: the fire inside me burning unstoppably; the joy of being loved; the feeling of being hugged by loved ones; finding hope in the dark room; and the strength to persevere no matter what it takes. But it didn't seem quite genuine for me to feel fake joys like when she recounted every detail about the feeling of inhaling cocaine, smoking cigarettes, and drinking bottles of high-percentage alcohol until you almost had nothing inside your head, unless you were doubting why the stars in the sky and the lights around the building were two very different things.

I didn't know what those feelings were like, even though I tried to contemplate them, but it felt like those were part of another world that I would only understand if I really stepped into that world.

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After that, she recalled how they were introduced to a really fancy and luxurious building that no one could ever imagine. It was just grandeur for a girl with little world to know. There were so many strange people with cars parked around the huge complex. There was also loud music, but this time even louder. And the lights, many more lights; the letters on the walls were even made of lights. Even if you were not drunk, it was pretty normal for your mind to mistakenly consider it as the sky full of stars. They were truly like that.

Moreover, she recalled the nice receptionists who welcomed them with beautiful smiles on their pretty faces. Then, they were led into a room, a very luxurious room full of clothes hanging in every corner. They were asked to change into the new clothes. The old ones were taken by the officers, so they were forced to choose new ones. At first, it looked good to have new clothes, but then they found out that the clothes were not anyone's expectations.

"They were too short. Some were transparent as if useless for grown-up girls like us. Others were, I would say, pieces of cloth," she recalled. "All of them were bright colors: red, yellow, white, pink, and so on, with some little shining fake jewels running on the surface, maybe to easily catch attention from others, from men."

She recalled that after almost an hour of inspecting thousands of clothes, none of them could cover up more than half of their bodies. It felt a little strange for a girl who had slept with hundreds of men to feel shy about their body, but it happened. Maybe being naked in a closed room was a little different from being naked in public.

"Nothing was more comfortable for me than to dress in a bra and shorts. I knew they were of no use, but they were the best among the others that I could ever find comfortable. The bra was a little transparent with

colorful dots around, and the shorts were so small that people could even see everything. But I could help with my hands if I could do so to cover,” she recalled.

Then, she tried to find her sister, but some girls also entered the room, making the room so full that it was difficult even to seek someone, let alone walk freely. It was loud too. I heard the joke that even if two girls are in a room, the storm could be heard outside, let alone a sea of girls inside a room, where you can’t even notice the music playing that loud.

“Then, as we were asked to walk out with our new dresses, my sister and I were separated, not seeing each other due to the crowd,” she recalled emotionlessly.

“I did not see her face anymore after that,” she cried hysterically, and I immediately hugged her on the back. She cried for a while until she summoned her strength to continue the story. In my heart, I really felt bad to ask her to continue the story, as I guessed that the direction of the story was leading to her most painful feeling: losing the person she loved the most. I almost wanted to tell her to stop the story, but it seemed like she really wanted to let those painful events out of her mouth. I could sense that at that time she did not try to filter any words she ought to say. Everything just flowed out of her mouth. It might have been a relief for her, I believe. She should let the dirty water flow out of her stagnant state, so it

can be filled with clean water again. Thus, she indeed let that water she had ever concealed flow out. It might have been painful to recall those memories, but it is even more painful to keep those memories haunting you slowly in secrecy.

“Before we went out as a group of about fifty girls, we were all forced to consume the pills, which were pretty much the same as the ones we saw on the very first day, but a different color, maybe a different function as well. We each got a pill in our hand to swallow. Then, there were men walking through us to make sure that everyone consumed it.”

“You know what?” she suddenly looked into my eyes as if some interesting part of the story was about to be told.

“Everyone consumed it, but I did not. I quickly hid it inside my bra, making sure that no one would notice. Knowing that the bra was a little bit transparent, I was thankful for the colorful dots that made me a little more confident that it would be difficult for anyone to find out.”

“I wondered why they all were so easy to consume the pills,” I cut into the story with my doubt.

“It was all about hope. ‘Rita, when you are hopeless, you almost cannot see the lights ahead of you,’ she spoke the perfect words,” I thought.

“They didn’t have plans to escape, so they just did whatever was ordered. Even when there were no men supervising us, they still swallowed those pills. Another reason was that those pills made them feel relief in the midst of the stressful dark world. They really needed the pills to calm their minds that were mixing every feeling up. But me, no! I had something to do that night.”

“But the problem was that I did not know where my sister was. But I knew that she did the same, because we had talked about it before. My eyes were so keen to scan through every corner, but I just could not see her,” she recalled with a sad look on her face.

“Then, everything went on. We were led to a large closed room. It looked so quiet outside, but as you entered, you found out that nothing could be heard except the sound of music. No one could speak to each other simply because it was impossible to hear. The music was so loud. Then, lights. Lights everywhere in the room; at that time, they were colorful.”

“Before you entered, there were two securities waiting, scanning every guest. I was really anxious at that time, fearing that they would find the pills and the plan would fail instantly. I thought about myself, and also about my sister; she might have done the same thing as I did. Then, it came close to my turn; I was really sweating, and my hands were trembling badly. However, I tried

my best not to look so suspicious to them. I swear, I had never been that afraid before,” I felt the same fear she recalled, while my mind was full of thoughts about how the story would turn out.

“Fortunately, all of a sudden, there was a ringing bell sound so loud it was intentionally for all the people in the complex to hear, followed by the announcement that the main guest was already coming. Most probably, he was that rich man everyone was talking about. I noticed that the two securities were totally distracted by the announcement and started to discuss some issues in a hurry. I took the opportunity!” she said in an excited voice.

“I slowly sneaked behind the girl in front of me, pretending to drop something on the ground. Then, I finally got inside,” she said with a smile.

I smiled as I heard that. How lucky she was; if not, I didn't know what would have happened next.

“Inside, everyone was dancing hysterically with the loud music and the lights. I could see that all the girls went really crazy dancing with men. It must have been the effect of those pills. I also danced to avoid any suspicions, knowing that in every corner, there were men spying on everything that was going on. I danced while my eyes were everywhere looking for my sister, and somehow I noticed a well-dressed man sitting in the center of the

stage with other men around. I guessed he was the main person in the room.”

“It was the first time I danced without consuming the pills, and I felt terribly tired after several minutes. I began to think about how I could bear dancing the whole night. Thus, I took the opportunity to go to the toilet often. There, I flushed the pill. Inside the toilet, as usual, you would find couples making love; there was no use in marking the separation between men and women in the toilet. Everyone just did not care about the signs. Sometimes, I would find old men sleeping on the floor in the toilet like dead people; I resolved not to disturb them, as I did not want to get in trouble. I also never felt disgusted about the smell of the toilet, but that time, I did. Moreover, everything seemed to me to be a horrible place to stay even for minutes, but over time, I just lived in that place. The pills must have been the reason behind every crazy thing I did. I had thought about it, but had not really experienced it until that day. Everything just sucked.”

“I wanted to sit a bit as an excuse, so I went to drink in the corner of the room. There were already some crazy people sitting there, laughing and shouting. To avoid suspicion, I pulled a heavily drunk old man with me. Old men were very conformist when they were drunk, I knew it. Then, we sat on the sofa, while he was hugging and kissing. I was happy that I could find that old man to avoid

any possibility of suspicion. He was the one who drank all the cups; I also sipped some, but I was very aware of every sip, trying not to get drunk. I needed to maintain my eyes and mind working well for the plan.”

“I would always find myself reading the name of the company that sold the drinks, to make sure that my eyes and mind were still normal. The company really made much money selling here, I thought inside my head. I noticed that some sellers started to feel suspicious of me, as I always looked at them. In fact, they did not drink at all, so they could easily notice any awkward thing in the room. I felt a bit anxious as they talked to each other while looking at me, holding the old drunk man.”

“So, I woke up the man and pulled him with me as we walked away. He was really difficult to walk, so I helped him by placing his arm on my shoulder. I led him into the ladies’ bathroom as if we wanted to make love inside. As I found everyone not so suspicious, I took the old man into one of the rooms and locked the door. There, I took advantage of the situation to take his clothes off. One thing I found fitting in that old man was that he wore a jacket; that was useful for me to camouflage. Then, I put on the long jeans and the jacket. With shoes on, I looked different, except for the face and the way I walked, which might have been a little suspicious, but the rest was perfect. And so, I went out dancing while leaving the old man sleeping inside.”

“I joined the crowd dancing. I tried to stay in the very middle of the room, knowing that the securities were in the corners. I danced with my face down, avoiding eye contact with anyone in the hall. Indeed, no one cared about a lonely man dancing in the middle; it was normal for men to dance alone, maybe with a lot of problems inside their heads to dance with. I danced while, every minute, I would quickly glance at the ones selling the drinks, because I thought I could find some opportunities there.”

“Then, suddenly the music stopped for a while, and everyone booed. Then, a man wearing a white shirt went up to stand on the stage and announced the last music, and everyone booed even louder. I also fake booed while looking closely at the sellers tidying up their things, and some even joined the crowd to dance for the last time. I waited patiently and attentively. I noticed about two people still working to take the things outside, probably to put in the car. As I was sure about this, I made my move. I quickly entered their tent to follow them at the back, while lifting some of their things with my face down. I hoped that no one would get suspicious of me; I got terrified as I realized that my clothes were different from their uniforms. I was really in fear while following them, making sure my footsteps were not too loud as we got outside towards the car. Then, the first person put his things inside the van, then walked past me, the second

put his, and walked even quicker past me, and my turn came. I looked back for a while and as I noticed that the back of the van was full of messy things, I took the advantage to hide deep inside. Then, the last things were put in, and then, puff, the door was shut.”

I dropped a heavy breath out of my nostrils as I listened to that intense part of the story. It was more intense than I had ever imagined.

“The car was stopped at the gate on the way out, but the security did not find out. I was sweating and breathed heavily inside the car. I guessed my breath could be heard if the driver had not played loud music in the car. Then, finally, the car passed the bars and went on the way. The music was so loud that I could not figure out the number of people inside the car. I thought of guessing the number of people inside the car by listening to the different voices, but it was difficult to do so. So, slowly I rose up my head to peek from the back. As I tried to get up, I dropped a can, and I sensed that it caught a bit of the driver’s attention, so I retraced down again. Then, after several minutes, I had another try. The driver was singing along the way, and I hoped he was a little drunk. I got surprised and happy to find out that there were no other people in the car except for the driver and me.”

“Then, a sudden break! I saw through the window, and there were no lights outside. Then, I noticed the door open.”

“The car parked in the middle of the jungle? I doubted it. I got up and saw that it was truly in the middle of the jungle, and the driver went to relieve himself. I smiled, slid the window open, and jumped out of the car. As I landed on the ground, the driver noticed me and shouted. I ran with all the strength I had left into the jungle, just running as fast as possible without caring about the direction I was heading. In my head, I imagined that he was probably running after me. After more than thirty minutes of running, I fell on the ground, banging my forehead on a rock. My eyes were a little blurry, and as I touched my forehead, my hand was full of blood. I cleaned my blood with the jacket sleeves. And I couldn’t help but close my eyes, being happy for a moment that the old driver did not follow me.”

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“As I closed my eyes, the image of my sister and I playing in the clinic when I was just a girl popped up, then her smile at me, and suddenly I woke up. I got up and found out the sunlight was striking directly into my eyes. It was already morning, and I was lying alone in the jungle. I got up immediately and started walking slowly ahead. From afar, I could notice a group of people wearing white cloak-like garments walking on the road. There was actually a village nearby the jungle.”

“I hid behind a tree to observe those people closely. They were actually a group of nuns in their uniforms,

walking with rosary beads in their hands, seeming like they were praying while walking somewhere. I found them safe to ask for help. And so, I ran quickly towards them out of the jungle.”

“Ajuda, Ajuda, Help, Help! I shouted with all my strength, making sure they would notice me by waving at them. Fortunately, the one at the back noticed me and started to call out for the attention of the others. There were about five nuns. They stopped for a while to scan me running from afar towards them. As I approached them, their faces turned into worry and care. They really felt pity for me even though they had not yet known what had happened to me. They held my hand tightly and paid close attention to my wound on my forehead. Without asking many questions, they signaled to each other. It turned out that two of them accompanied me to their convent, and three of them continued walking. Later, I found out that that day they were walking to the church nearby to attend mass.”

“I was sure they were very nice to you,” I interjected with a smile on my face.

“Yes, the nicest people I have ever met,” she recalled while smiling gently. “They took care of my wound and gave me a new dress that looked like one of the religious garments. But there were no other clothes available,” she sighed and continued.

“I stayed there for more than a year before I decided to leave.” I immediately had the question of why she decided to leave, but I kept that question for later, just letting her continue the story.

“I learned many things from them: waking up early, living as a community, praying together every morning, evening, and night, attending mass every early morning, and so on.”

“But what I liked the most were: first, regularly visiting and giving food to the poor families around the neighborhood at night. I felt that so much. Some family members were sick and old, and their faces lit up as we arrived. The nuns would sometimes sing for them, especially on Sundays. Second, every month we would travel about an hour away to the city to visit the prisoners. The nuns used to share their reflections on the gospel with them. I was interested in listening because I felt very new to the good words inside the gospel. Therefore, I always sat behind the prisoners with my notebook to write down the reflections. I remember there was a section only for the girls convicted of crimes like abortion, murder, and so on. They looked hopeless, and I really wanted to inspire them with my story, but every time I would cover up my identity. I was not brave enough to accept my past. For that moment, I wanted to bury those past memories alive. Every time I was visited by those memories, at night I would go to the oldest nun

in the convent and talk with her about it. I really found consolation while talking with her. Her name was *madre* Ana. After the conversation, I felt relief in my soul. She promised to always remember me in her prayers. She is the one who knew me better than the other nuns. It was just a matter of being comfortable sharing my story with her. Only she knew that I had a sister and my past. Others only knew that I was raped one night and ran away, which was a fake story I just made up. I was sure they were a little suspicious about my story, but they resolved not to ask many questions.”

“Third, we also had wonderful times visiting the orphanage. Actually, the orphanage was taken care of by the nuns as well, but of another congregation. It was not so far from the convent. Just like visiting the poor families, we would go there every Sunday. I felt so happy to see those kids still being happy even though they lived without parents around them. I guess the nuns took care of them with much love. We would always bring some food and, of course, sing with them to bring joy.”

“To my surprise, I found myself in those three places we went: in the poor family, prisoner, and orphan. First, I felt myself as a daughter in the poor family. I remembered my parents and sister every time I went there. I really felt that love should be the center of every family. People used to call that kind of family ‘poor’ like I was, but then I changed my mind—they are actually rich, very rich because of love,

joy, and peace. I knew many rich men in the bar back then who had wives and kids, but still searched for something else in the dark world. They would say they were searching for love, joy, and peace, but those you find in the bar are fake. As you go out of the bar, you will feel the same stress, depression, and regret. They are actually 'poor.' In fact, money does not make people rich at all. Sometimes, I felt grateful that I grew up in a remote village, where I was able to experience true 'wealth' in my life. And my parents truly lived happily as a couple."

"Then, in the prisoner, I was not that different from them when I was in the dark world. Really the same: living a life of misery, almost finding no light, and sometimes only your breath tells you that you are still alive. It's like being a dead person living in a world of the living. And an orphan." She suddenly paused for a moment in sadness. Her breath became a bit intense for a while. "That's the reason I left the convent," she looked into my eyes, almost crying.

"What happened?" I asked in as slow and soft a voice as possible, just to not hurt her feelings. She covered her face with her hands and started to cry silently. I hugged her and tried to feel the same emotions she was experiencing.

"Every time I visited the orphanage, I wanted to meet my parents as soon as possible. I visited only twice, and

after that, I decided not to go there anymore. I just could not bear that feeling of being apart from them. After many years of living as a grown-up, I realized that my deepest desire was to meet them and hug them as hard as possible because I missed them so much. I told that desire to the old nun, and she knew it very well. So after a year and a month, I decided to stand up and tell this to the superior of the convent. My wish was to leave the convent and visit my family. Finally, I had the courage because *madre* Ana also supported me and advised me the same. For the first time, the superior asked me to think again. Honestly, I did not know the reason behind her decision, but I kept obeying. Then, after a month, I went again to meet her in her room. And that time, she finally accepted my request. So the next morning, all the *madres* gathered in the refectory and gave me a farewell. Before I left, they sang me a thankful song which we used to sing to the families we visited. I felt so sad and joyful at the same time. I thought I was not worthy of that song; I thought I was the one to give them thanks for saving my life, not them.”

“Then, three *madres* accompanied me to drive me to the bus station. One of them was *madre* Ana. I was so happy that she also went with me. Along the way, we listened to some Marian songs that, by that time, I had memorized because we sang them many times during the Marian month. I sang the songs with them while looking

through the window, waving my hand in the air to feel the breeze. After about two hours, we arrived at the bus station. I got out of their car by kissing their hands. As I kissed *madre* Ana's hand, I cried instantly while hugging her so tightly. I cried with my voice out loud. Then, she promised me again to pray for me, and her words were, 'Be brave, God is always with you.' I nodded and wiped my tears as I went down."

"They really wanted to wait for the bus with me until I got on, but I refused again and again. And so, with a smile, they decided to leave, telling me to give their greetings to my parents once I got home. As they left, I looked at *madre* Ana, and both of us nodded to each other with serious faces, while the other two nuns were smiling. They went on, and I kept my tear-filled eyes on the car until it disappeared. Then, I held my bag tightly, feeling a bit nervous. Suddenly, I saw the bus that my sister and I had ridden a few years ago, coming through the entrance. I still recognized the same driver. The driver who also worked with the strange men in trading innocent girls. That time, I felt no fear inside me; I immediately walked towards the bus as it stopped. As I walked ahead, the words of *madre* Ana constantly echoed in my mind with every step. The driver had not seen me even at a near distance already. Then, I approached him from behind while he was standing at the back of the bus, murmuring slowly in his ear: "Take me back to the place my sister is right now."

PART IV

Then, she recalled how that driver drove her back to the first station.

“As I went down from the car, there were already two men with sticks in their hands waiting for me outside. Then, they beat me, causing me to be half dead. When I became conscious again, I was lying on a hard plank, naked, and it was a little difficult to breathe. Then, there you were by my side.” I sighed heavily as the story ended.

Both of us smiled at each other and then looked down. What an incredible story I just heard. I swear that it would remain forever in my mind. I felt so touched and found it a bit complicated in my mind to accept that as real. It was a really hard reality to face, but it was still a reality, with no escape.

“So, *madre* Ana knows you are here to meet your beloved sister,” I tried to confirm. She nodded in agreement. I had a spontaneous thought to ask why she wanted to take this risk to meet her sister, but then, I decided not to ask that question. The answer must be love, and that’s all. “I want to go home with Rita,” she said with a blank stare, remembering her sister.

“I could imagine myself going home without her by my side. What would I say to father and mother? How would I recount this complicated long story? And their questions. Their sadness, maybe anger as well. And

everything. I just can't do that. I still feel lost without her by my side."

"Tomorrow. Tomorrow is the day for us to meet again," she continued talking with a genuine smile on her face. "I will introduce you to her. I am sure she will be happy to meet you, especially since both of you have the same name, Rita." I smiled as I heard that. I also sincerely wanted to meet her sister because I was really touched by her act of love. What a girl. When I meet her tomorrow, I imagine, I will have to say thank you to her for being such a good sister, and I will ask her to teach me how to be a great sister one day when I get home.

Suddenly, doubt struck me about how we would escape from that kind of prison. I really doubted it, but everything she said was beyond my expectations. In some instances, I could not imagine how to escape and make plans. Let alone the fact that everyone already knew who she was: a feto-aat who had escaped once. Everyone's eyes must be on her all the time. I had all these questions in my head, but I did not have the courage to ask. Probably, I did not want to kill her hope. But was it hope or just an unrealistic scene inside her head? So, I just waited to see how everything would unfold.

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Just in the very early morning, they knocked on the door and brought breakfast: two pieces of bread with

two packs of milk. Then, we were taken to shower for the first time in two days. After that, we got new dresses to wear. The clothes were not so bad, and I felt comfortable wearing them, although the jewelry on the clothes made me a little unsettled. Around 10 in the morning, we went for another two-hour drive inside the car towards the final destination, the place where the girl dreamed of meeting her sister, who had the same name as mine.

Inside the car, we didn't talk much like before. I noticed her face full of joy with her eyes closed, sitting in the corner. Maybe she was imagining her sister's face after a year of not seeing each other. I was happy to see that expression on her. Truly, she was a gentle girl with a kind heart, full of hope. I then found myself sitting in another corner, fixing my eyes on the small window up in the car, enjoying the play of sunlight. I didn't try to sleep because she told me it would take about two days to get there. I was excited and curious about the place she described. I couldn't wait to witness with my own eyes what was going on in that dark world. At the same time, I could sense the fear inside me as I imagined myself in the place of the other girls who were there.

I didn't even try to answer the question that popped up in my mind: how will it be like as a prostitute? I didn't want to answer it because I resisted the idea of becoming one of them. I didn't want to live that life. It's not about pitying or judging them, but honestly, I felt that way of

life wasn't worth living. That's an honest answer from me that I kept to myself. I promised that I would never try to consume any of the pills there, even if they forced or beat me. Let alone trying to swallow any cocaine or drinking and smoking cigarettes. No, I promised myself I wouldn't do that. That's how I give value to my life as a girl. I know this promise could be seen as a hope for me. I hoped that nothing bad would happen to me.

*

The sudden break startled us both. We exchanged glances, and she was the first to smile at me. I smiled back, feeling a mix of anticipation and uncertainty. She nodded slightly and mentioned that we had arrived at the entrance. After a few minutes of hearing some people chatting outside, possibly the security guards, the car moved again.

The car stopped, and I heard the key in the door. She got up instantly and approached the door, waiting for it to be opened. She was full of energy, and I got up and stood behind her. I wanted her to step out first, then I would follow. When the door opened, she immediately ran out of the car. To my surprise, a man crossed her path and punched her in the belly, then kicked her, making her lie on the ground. Around the complex, there was an echo of boos, likely from the girls in the building.

Now it was my turn to step out. Seeing her lying desperately on the ground, clutching her belly, I was

terrified. The boos continued to fill the complex as I slowly stepped out of the car, letting the sunlight touch my skin. I walked out and stood outside the car door, wondering what would happen to me. The same man approached me with a hurried stride, seemingly about to give me another punch. I raised my hands to cover my face, but then a male voice struck his attention.

“*Keta*. Don’t.” I didn’t know who said that, but it stopped me from getting hurt. I slowly uncovered my face and noticed that the complex was silent, without boos. Then, I calmed my breath again.

I noticed a man standing on the second floor, watching us. I couldn’t really make out his face due to the sunlight striking directly into my eyes, but I was sure the voice was his. He seemed like someone important in the building, someone everyone listened to. Then, he walked into the room, disappearing from sight. As he vanished, the small talk among the people started to emerge again, filling the complex.

Two masked men then came from inside the building and pulled both of us with them. I noticed she had a bit of difficulty walking. As we entered a room, we passed through corridors filled with girls standing around, smoking, drinking, teasing us, and staring strangely at us. It seemed like some of them knew who Rosa was and began to gossip as we walked through. I noticed there were almost hundreds of girls inside.

As we were about to enter the room, some of them spat at Rosa's face. Seeing this, I was unbearably angry, but I tried my best not to overreact in such a place with new people. I just wondered why the men took no action against that disrespectful act. But I reminded myself of who they were and the kind of place we were in.

We entered the room, a really fancy luxurious room, just like a living room for rich people. We sat on the sofa while those two men walked out and locked the door. I immediately inched toward her and asked whether she was okay. She was not, I noticed. She did not say a word, just placed her hands on her belly with her eyes closed. I sat right next to her and hugged her. I did not know and did not care what was going on or why we were in that luxurious room. It seemed like we were waiting for someone. I wanted to ask her about it, but I decided not to, seeing her condition. I just looked around the room and tried to scan every detail of it.

After several minutes, two masked men in black suits entered the room and stood around the chair in front of us, fixing their eyes on us firmly. I had millions of questions racing through my head, but I kept my mouth shut at that moment. Then, another three men walked through the door. The one in the middle looked very different from the other two at his sides. It seemed like they were securing him.

The atmosphere in the room became even more tense with their presence. The menacing aura of the masked men and the apparent importance of the man in the middle heightened the sense of uncertainty and unease. The situation felt more serious, and the anticipation of what was to come grew stronger. We remained silent, waiting to see what would happen next, bracing ourselves for whatever lay ahead.

“Mrs. Reys,” Rosa spoke slowly to me in a low voice. I bet that was the man she talked about—the rich man who organized the party every year. And most probably, he was the man who recently stood on the upper building, ordering the man not to hurt me. I hope that he was a good man, and could hear my reasons, and also have pity on Rosa.

And so he sat in the chair with four bodyguards standing behind him. He was an older man, but not too old, around his fifties, like some uncles in the family, with some white hairs. He had a round face, a white beard, and fair skin. He looked at both of us for a while before lighting up his cigarette. The air changed as he started to smoke, and we stayed silent, feeling a bit clueless. The three of us remained in total silence until he finally finished smoking his cigarette.

“Rosa,” he shook his feet as he talked. “I can see you are smarter than your sister. Am I right?” he asked with a plain face.

“Where is she?” Rosa spoke with a hint of anger.

“You must know, my little smart girl,” he said, smiling sarcastically.

“Why do you seem so innocent about what you have done, my daughter?” he said, standing up and starting to walk around. Both of us remained silent, and I noticed her breath was not under control.

“May I know why you came back?” he asked, stopping and looking at her suspiciously.

“I want to meet my sister. Just tell me where she is now,” she replied with a touch of anger. I held her hands tightly to make sure she wouldn’t lose control.

The old man smiled a bit and sat down again, lighting another cigarette. He blew out the smoke with relief, seemingly indifferent to the question.

“May you answer my question, sir?” she began to raise her voice slightly in anger. It did not affect the old man, who continued to smoke calmly. She then repeated the question, adding, “Do you hear me?” Her anger was evident, and she did not care about who they were talking to or the risk involved in taking such a stance. A security guard started to walk toward us, but was then signaled to stop.

“Answer my question first, then I will tell you my answer,” he said slowly, placing his cigarette in the ashtray.

“Okay, I came back for my sister,” she responded immediately. “Where is she now?”

The man looked at her, “Really your sister? I know how smart you are, but don’t try to fool me. I’ve never seen such a scene. Do you think I believe what you just said?” he smiled.

“I have no other reason to tell you then. This is the only reason I have.” The man interrupted, “Uhm, I am wondering how a year can change a person so much,” he said, looking genuinely thoughtful.

“You can go now,” he signaled to the men, “bring her to her biin.” As we were about to leave, he stopped me.

“Not you,” he said, pointing at me. Rosa looked worried as I sat back on the sofa. I was terribly afraid, sweating as I looked into her eyes. She noticed my fear.

“Wait,” she said suddenly, “we will go out together.”

The old man looked back. “Uhm, I bet you are crazy enough to see your sister.”

“She is also my younger sister,” she said, and I was so touched in the heart. Tears welled up in my eyes, and some dropped down my cheek. The words “younger sister” felt like a knife cutting into my heart. My feelings were a mix of emotions, indistinguishable from one another.

And so, the men let her sit next to me on the sofa. That time, she held my hand to comfort me as I used to do.

“I know both of them have the same names, but she is not your sister, right?” he laughed loudly. I looked so confused, wondering how he knew my name. I bit my lips in fear. I was not that brave girl I used to imagine. I was in fear, a fear that I could not control anymore. I sweated a lot, and she noticed it. I knew that she might also be confused about how the old man knew my name so quickly. Let alone, I was never asked by anyone in that new place about my name. Only Rosa knew my name.

“I know, I know, you’re confused; how can this old man know your name, right?” he laughed briefly.

“Your father told me,” he said in a plain voice.

“Papa?” I asked, and he nodded. This really confused me, deeply puzzled about everything that had transpired over the past three days. I stared at the old man’s face, trying to figure out how he knew me and what his relation to my father was.

“How can papa know that old man?” I thought inside my head over and over again, without seeking the answer from myself, just waiting for his response.

“How do you know papa?” I asked, then added another question, “Who are you?” He lifted his eyebrows and fixed his eyes on me. Then, he stood up and started walking around us like before.

“Your father and I, we’re kind of friends, let’s say,” he continued talking. I didn’t believe him at first, not until

he mentioned papa's name: Carlos, and also his *jentiu* name, Bere—names that only a few specific people knew, even among friends, only really close ones knew it. And this old strange man knew it. I couldn't believe it.

I was certain that he knew my father, and they were most probably close, but I still couldn't figure out how they knew each other, or what the nature of their relationship was. My curiosity was piqued, and I was eager to know the story behind their connection. I paid close attention to every word he uttered, treating them as important clues.

"I bet you are wondering how we can be friends, close friends, right?" I looked into his eyes firmly, signaling him to continue.

"We met two years ago. It was in the clinic, I guess. You were there too, outside," he began to recall. "I bet you did not know why your papa had to lie in the clinic for almost a month. Yes, maybe you know that he had an illness, but not more than that."

He paused for a moment, and I realized that everything he said made perfect sense; I really didn't know what disease papa had suffered from back then, and I had never asked mama either.

"Tumor. He suffered from a tumor," he said, looking at me with pitying eyes. I knew a little about that type of disease because mama once told me that my grandfather

had suffered from it and died. I didn't know much, but she said that to cure this disease, we had to spend a lot of money for the doctors to remove something inside his body. She said that the "something" was called a tumor. That was all I knew, nothing more.

The man's words resonated in my mind, but the pieces still didn't fit together. My father's recovery, funded by this stranger, was a revelation, but it left me with more questions than answers.

"To cut a long story short, for some reasons, I paid a lot of money just for your father to recover from that disease. And he fortunately got back his health. He could finally have some more years to live and laugh with you," he said. Then, he stopped as if the story had already ended, but I still didn't get to the part I needed to understand.

My mind raced with questions: "How does this relate to me? Why should I be here? What really happened? And the rape? This dark place, why?" The questions swirled around in my head, causing a pounding headache.

"He told me to pay back the money after he recovered. I am a person who never forgets any promise, so I kept it well in my head," he said as he sat down and started shaking his feet again.

Then, he looked at Rosa and gave a fake smile. "You must know well, you smart girl, how a shepherd will pay his debt," he laughed so loudly that his voice filled the

entire room while looking at me. My face turned red, and my breath became intense. My whole body was trembling. I tried to stand up and shouted bad words at him—words that should never have slipped from my lips. I was taught not to say such things, especially to an elder. But at that moment, I did. I acted hysterically, with tears streaming down my face uncontrollably. I shouted without knowing who I was, where I was, or what would happen to me. I felt nothing about myself.

Rosa used all her strength to calm me down and held me back, preventing something worse from happening to us. The man then walked out, signaling the men to take us out of the room. I found myself crying the whole night, shouting hysterically. My voice eventually gave out, and for the first time, I had a desire to not live in this world anymore. I just wanted to die as soon as possible. I wanted to end my breath before thinking of the people I loved, and I knew they loved me.

What I had heard moments ago shattered me. I couldn't feel my soul living inside me. I could feel the breath I was inhaling, but everything felt like nothing. Only the pain in my heart remained, covering all of me. Everything lost its interest for me, and everything became hate; no more love, nothing considered good. I was alone and lonely—a lonely soul that wanted nothing more than sleep and dream of nothing. Because everything I felt was hurtful, everything I thought hurt me, and everything around me felt like nothing. Truly, nothing at all.

PART V

“What else is worthy for a girl who has lost everything? Don’t tell her about those she loves, because she does not really believe in them. Just talk about something else. If you say that no one ever loves her, it sounds okay to her, rather than telling her a lie that all people love her or that the world is good soil for love to grow.”

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“A soulless body,” I thought it was the best phrase to describe me.

Just a girl who did not know what to do with her life. Every day was the same for me. Nothing was new in that tiny dark world surrounded by tall walls. In the evenings, I would go to the upper floor and sit alone there, seeing a little bit of the road outside and the forest with some birds flying freely on their own. They sang, I guess, but I did not really hear them clearly. And the horizon was just that beautiful when the sun set; the sky would change its color to reddish orange, and slowly the darkness enveloped all the vast terrain, leaving only that tiny dark world shining alone in the midst of the vast jungle.

I used to sit alone, walk almost alone, eat alone, and mostly be alone because even Rosa was slowly distancing herself from me. I wondered what the reason behind her actions was. Sometimes I cried alone while lying on the bed when I remembered those three days that had made my soul really close to her. The memories in the cold

room; the stories inside the car; the nights sleeping in the strange white room; her long story of her past life that moved me so much; and the moment she announced in the fancy luxurious room that I was her younger sister. Those were the best memories now, but sometimes everything changed really quickly.

There must have been reasons why Rosa became a different person to me. First, I guessed that maybe it was because she had already encountered her sister, whom she had missed so much. Perhaps the presence of her sister had something to do with it. The second reason, which I believed to be most true, was that she started to notice the different treatment I received from the agents compared to the other girls, including herself. The difference was that I had a little bit more freedom than they did.

I was forced to swallow the pills just like them, but not the cocaine. I found out that they were forced to inhale cocaine every time, but somehow I was not. Moreover, I had the freedom to decide whether I wanted to make love with certain kinds of men, unlike them. I also had some other privileges, such as having a room just for me to sleep in and more. The difference sometimes became so explicit that I could no longer bear hiding it. I also felt that this could generate jealousy among us, especially between me and Rosa.

I started to notice the weirdness from my first month, and then everything just flowed with time.

I really wanted to clarify everything and make it clear that there was no such privilege among us, just differences. I also had nightmares that I resolved not to tell anyone, including her. What no one knew about me was that even though I wasn't forced to consume cocaine, I was forced to consume some awkward drug that made me almost lose my mind every time I took it. Another difference was that even though I had the freedom to choose the men to sleep with, the truth was that I had no choice but to sleep every night with the old man who happened to be the owner of that dark world. They didn't know any of this, and when people don't know much about you, they tend to judge you.

I knew how cruel it was to live as they did, but I wished they could also feel how painful it was to suffer alone. That was the big difference. We all suffered; the difference was that they suffered together, and I suffered alone. To suffer alone was the most painful feeling anyone could ever experience—feeling lonely, having no one to speak with, sitting alone, no feelings to be shared, laughing alone out of stress on the top of the building, and constantly having thoughts of ending this life. I just couldn't bear it anymore, to live a life of real misery. Sometimes I entertained myself with some alcohol, but it didn't cure me. It maybe just helped me to be absent

from this world for a while, but after that, I found myself in the same place that seemed to be designed for eternal suffering.

I have heard of hell, but why should I care for it when, in this world, I have already tasted it? And heaven, at least since I was inside this dark world, I did not want to talk about it. I was afraid that I would forget who I was and where I was.

Truly, I felt that I was living in the most miserable place I had ever lived in. Let alone no one stood beside me. Now, I feel that company can cure suffering. You could suffer so much, but when someone stands next to you, suffering with you, your suffering becomes lesser. Sometimes, the joy of company surpasses the torture of suffering.

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One evening, I felt a surge of courage within me, the courage to do something about what was going on in my life. I knew very well that many things were unrecoverable, but at least I could try my best to recover some that were possible. I sipped slowly from the cup of Red Label, watching the sunset as usual. Knowing that Uncle Reys would be absent that night, having gone for business in the city and would be back the next day, I resolved that night I would climb down and meet Rita to talk to her personally about what had happened

all that time. I just really needed to do that before my overthinking killed me overnight.

I then placed aside the unfinished cup of Red Label and went downstairs as I saw that the car was already out. It had been months since I had climbed down the stairs after noticing that Rita acted so weird around me. I decided not to get too close to her, not because of hatred in me toward her, but because I feared that we might hate each other for no reason. I still remember the last night I met her when she was sitting and chatting with other girls, laughing. As she saw me approaching the group, she immediately left the conversation. I noticed it with a smile on my face; she even did not make eye contact with me. That was the only scene that made me decide to keep my distance; I would say it was the culminating scene. There had already been many incidents that I tried my best not to let concern me.

As I went down the stairs, I felt a little bit nervous; my eyes were scanning around while avoiding much eye contact with other girls. It seemed to me that almost every girl in the room knew me more than just my name. I could sense their eyes on me as I walked through the corridors. But I didn't care too much about it, because my only preoccupation at that moment was finding the girl who, just a few months ago, had seemed so different to me—Rosa. Her sister could be the cue, but I didn't find her either. I thought that if I could find her sister, then

I would easily find her as well. Honestly, I didn't know much about her friends. I knew that she befriended many girls in the room, but I was not like her.

At some point, I wanted to simply ask any girl in the room for her information, but I refused to do so. Let me seek first. If it became almost impossible to find her, then I would summon the courage to ask some girls along the corridor. I was sure that out of ten girls, five of them would know her and almost everything about her.

I wandered around the rooms and corridors for almost an hour, but I didn't find her or even a trace. I had an instant thought that she might have known about my plan to come down and meet her, and therefore had walked away and hidden somewhere, but that was just nonsense; it was impossible to be that way. Then I had a thought to check the last room: the room for dresses. There was a security guard standing in front of the door, masked. It seemed like he was the one guarding that room—the only room guarded all night. How strange it was for security to waste his time and energy guarding a room that no one had any interest in sneaking through. Because inside, there were just clothes that I guessed no girls ever wanted to dress in. The room only opened once a year for party purposes, to force all girls to wear weird clothes that really had no difference from being naked.

It was clearly impossible that Rosa and maybe her sister too were inside, but it was just an instant thought

for me to do so. Thus, I rushed towards that room. I could see that the security guard noticed me from afar; maybe he also knew something more than just my name, I was sure about that. As I got closer to him, to my surprise, he moved away from the door, letting me freely decide whether to enter the room. He did not utter a single word, as usual.

I entered and walked around the room for no particular reason. The security guard might have thought I was looking at the dresses or something else, but I didn't know. Only he knew. I just walked quickly through the room and then got out again, standing in front of the door next to the stoic security guard.

"Excuse me, sir," I spoke while pointing my finger at him. "Do you know where Rita is with her sister?" I looked into his eyes, asking suspiciously.

"Yes," he finally spoke, uttering just a single word.

"Where can I find them?" I asked.

Without saying a word, the security guard immediately locked the dress room and began walking in front of me, signaling for me to follow him. Later, I found out that they had already been moved to another section, namely section C. As far as I knew, this was the place used to accumulate the 'dangerous girls.' These were the ones who frequently acted against the order and rules, and some of them were suspected of planning escapes. I was

not so surprised to find out that news; I knew what kind of girl Rosa was. She was smart and determined to realize whatever she planned. Therefore, if she was determined to escape, it made sense that they would need to keep a close eye on her.

From what I knew, in that section, the ‘dangerous girls’ were exposed to some cruel actions. Namely, they were forced to consume even more dangerous drugs that could possibly cause memory loss or death. This was what I was worried about; that they could only bear it for a little time before I could do something about it when I had some power for a few minutes.

After entering that building, I noticed that the corridors and rooms were not very bright; they were kind of dim. Silence filled the corridor, and no voices came from the rooms we passed by. We walked by several silent rooms until the masked man stopped at a room numbered A243. He unlocked the door and stood in the doorway, as if he was waiting for me outside.

The room was truly dark, so I asked the man to increase the intensity of the light a little. It turned out that the light was controlled by the security outside; they could regulate the intensity of the light as they wanted. Most of the time, they lowered the light as a form of torture.

As he turned up the light, I saw two figures lying on the floor, covered with thick mantles, their faces turned

towards the wall. I couldn't see their faces, but I guessed that the one lying closer to the door was Rosa, judging by the height. Rita was a little taller than her sister. I entered, walking slowly so as not to wake them up. I found that the room was not very large and smelled bad due to the absence of a toilet. But I could bear it. There were no toilets provided in section C. Everything was done in the one and only room provided to them. It wasn't worthy of being called a 'room'; it was more like a cell.

"They really wanted to kill these girls," I thought to myself. I found two chairs in the corner, brought one to the center, and sat on it. I sat facing the two girls lying in their deep sleep.

I ordered the security to close the door and stay outside. He seemed doubtful at first, but then he agreed to do so. As the door shut, I cried on my own. Indeed, I could not bear seeing this misery with my own eyes. I really wanted to feel what they were feeling—to stay in a dark and smelly cell, lying on the floor all night, and so on. Just by seeing this, I didn't want to think anymore about other treatments: food, hygiene, and so on.

I sat there for almost ten minutes until I noticed Rosa begin to move, perhaps due to the light. Slowly, she made more moves as she started to get up. Then, she stood up. She was really terrified to realize there was a third presence in the room. Both of us looked each other

in the eyes. Tears ran down my cheeks even more as I saw her face—dirty and thin. She looked so different that I couldn't help but immediately get up from the chair and run towards her to hug her so tightly that I didn't even think of letting her go from my arms.

I hugged her and felt how thin she had become. She was unmoved at first, but then suddenly she placed her thin arms around me, hugging me with the little strength that still remained in her. The girl whose strength I had once admired now seemed so weak that I could hardly imagine it. I cried even more, and she began to cry too.

I cried while saying “*deskulpa*, sorry,” many times over and over again. She did not say a word, but hugging me meant a lot to me at that time. It felt like her tears and hands over me were what I wanted to last forever at that moment when I really felt lost. At the moment when I did not trust in love and friendship anymore, these were more than enough to convince me back.

“You are my sister, my *biin*,” I cried out. “Please forgive me.” I noticed her arms held me tighter as I said that. That moment lasted forever in that tiny dark room of the dying girls.

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After that, both of us had a deep conversation for an hour, which she found as a time to spill everything she had ever kept in her heart. I could sense the same vibration in

her as those moments inside the car. Indeed, nothing had changed about her—only her appearance, but not her heart. She also apologized for the misjudgment she had before, saying she had already found out what had really happened to me. She always waited for the day I would come downstairs so she could hug me and say sorry, but then I stopped appearing.

She worried so much about finding out the truth about me. Every night, while sitting together with her sister, she talked too much about me and her worries. So, one day, her sister, with courage, decided that both of them would go upstairs to see me. But it turned out they got caught by the security guards and were heavily suspected of having some bad intentions towards *tiu* Reys. Adding to her past story of escape, they didn't think twice about putting them inside section C.

I was really moved by what she said and, at the same time, felt guilty that I was the reason why they had suffered up to that moment. What shocked me was that her sister, after several months of staying there, had suffered from an overdose and some complications that later caused her to lose her memory. She might sleep the whole day, not talking much. She just happened to shout when she was hungry, then sleep again. Sometimes, she acted so brutally toward Rosa, beating her until she bled, but Rosa did not resist. "She is still my sister," Rosa said in tears.

Indeed, those dangerous drugs had caused her to be that way. Rosa also admitted that, sooner or later, she might suffer the same fate as her sister. This made me cry, as I could not imagine such suffering. I used to complain about my suffering, but in fact, I was just too selfish to feel that way. They had suffered more than I had. It was not right for me to compare my suffering to theirs. How selfish I was.

In the end, we hugged, and I promised her that sooner or later, she and her sister would not be in that 'cell' anymore. I looked into her eyes and made sure of this. I could see that she really trusted me, as if she knew that everything was possible. I sighed, feeling like I had something in my head that had been buried for years, waiting to explode. In that moment, it just popped out, and I found it perfect. I wished her goodnight and walked out. I was deeply moved to see her smile for the first time after what felt like an eternity of not seeing her. That meeting gave me a new breath of air, a hope to live my life. I had never seen a dying girl who could teach me how to sing a song of hope. How weak I had been to live without hope. Truly, anyone who is hopeful, lives.

The security then shut the door and turned off the light of that 'cell.' I smiled a little, knowing that in that dark room, there was a light that no one saw. A light that burned unstoppably, keeping a person alive; a girl living even though the world considered her as dead.

There is no hell in the world, just selfish people. Those are the people who create the hell in the world, burning themselves out of hopelessness.

“Be brave, God is always with you,” were her last words before I left. Those were the words of *madre* Ana, who had told her that a few years ago.

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The next day, as the sun rose, I went up to the top of the building and sat there, inhaling the fresh air coming from the vast horizon. I sighed and felt alive. The wind blew my hair and kissed me on the cheek. Then, the bell rang, signaling it was time for me to act. I rose up, seeing that *tiu* Reys had just entered through the entrance with his black car.

I went down to the living room, preparing myself to welcome him. I saw through the glass that he was in a black suit, secured as he walked out of the car and entered the building. I felt a little bit nervous, but I never thought of changing my mind. I was really committed to walking out of my ‘cell’ that had kept me from being free for years. It was enough for a girl to keep living her life imprisoned.

I imagined every step he might take before reaching the room: the corridors, his black shoes, the locked rooms, the securities with masks on, and so on. When the door opened, I found myself sitting on the sofa in the clothes I had taken from the dress room the previous night.

The clothes reminded me of the first time I stepped into this dark world—an innocent and loving girl. I walked towards him and kissed him without saying a word, then walked away upstairs. He smiled and followed me, leaving the securities in the living room.

We both entered the bedroom, and what happened next, no one ever knew, just the rough screams of the old man and I that suddenly echoed out of the bedroom and caught the securities' attention. They ran upstairs as quickly as possible and banged on the locked door. Inside, they found two dead bodies: one of their boss and the other, mine. Both of us were dead in the room.

EPILOGUE



I tried to open my eyes, but everything was blurry, so I closed them again. I felt a little pain in my back, but I could move an inch to alleviate it. My body was lying on a bed with small wheels. I could feel them every time I was moved from one room to another. It must have been a hospital, and that was actually part of the plan. I was weak and had difficulty breathing, but two things were certain to me: First, I would not die. And second, that dark world had come to its end.

I killed that old man that early morning inside the bedroom, locked with a knife I had put under the pillow. I had already planned it all the night before, after coming back from section C. I had it all figured out in my head after that conversation. I shared my plan with Rosa that night, and she told me about how the drug that was often forcibly given to them could cause a body to appear 'dead' for several hours. In fact, the drug had a side effect that caused a person who consumed it to have almost all their systems become non-functional, with only the respiration and heartbeat continuing, causing people to

suspect they were dead. Thus, that night before leaving section C, I asked the security to put a small sack of it in my pocket. And so, after the murder, I immediately consumed it. The drug had a quick effect that immediately caused me to appear 'dead' with the blood of the old man all over my clothes

Later, after I had recovered, I still had the wound in my right arm caused by the knife cut from the old man during the fight. So, I had a bandage over it. Just as I thought of going out, police officers and two men in suits came into the room to investigate me. The first sentence out of my mouth was "I am innocent" as a defense.

Fortunately, it turned out that they already knew the information behind this incident. Just then, before the further investigation, I asked them to recount whatever had happened while I was lying on the bed. And so, they told me that the dark trade, which I considered the dark world, was already under investigation; they were capturing and about to sentence those who were behind it. The victims had already been evacuated and were under protection, receiving any possible treatment, especially those in dire need. As the police officer mentioned 'those in need,' I immediately thought of Rosa and her sister, as well as those who were in section C. They were the ones who truly needed to be cared for. After some conversation, the police officer and two men in suits left me, saying they would come back later to collect further

information. Then, I asked the doctors to lead me to the room where the section C girls were being treated. I walked, trembling a little as the effects of the drug still lingered, but inside me, no one could describe the feeling of joy. As I walked towards the ICU room, tears streamed down my face uncontrollably.

Just then, I saw both of them lying side by side among the other girls, with tubes around their bodies. She was sleeping. I ran towards her and hugged her so tightly. Sensing my presence, she woke up in tears of joy and pride at the same time. I then held her skinny hands tightly, looked into her eyes filled with tears, breathing intensely, and said, “We made it. We really made it.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Nilton Nixon is a Timorese writer renowned for his captivating fiction novels. He has authored three books: *The Hidden* (2024), *Tasi-na'in* (2025), and *I Died Twice* (2025). All his works are written in English and Tetum, reflecting his deep connection to Timorese culture and beliefs, which he strives to incorporate into his novels, making them truly Timorese.

Nilton graduated from Instituto São João de Brito, a Jesuit education institution. His educational background has significantly influenced his writing style and themes. In addition to his novels, Nilton has contributed to children's literature, with books available in the digital library, Library For All.

Currently residing in Dili, Nilton continues to share his passion for storytelling, drawing inspiration from his rich cultural heritage and personal experiences.